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1991

# **PROCEEDINGS OF THE CENTER FOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN LEARNING**

## **Political Issues Facing Jewish-Christian Dialogue**

REV. ROBERT F. DRINAN, S.J.

MRS. GERI JOSEPH

RABBI DAVID N. SAPERSTEIN

## **What Jews Can Learn From Christian Spirituality**

DR. CAROL OCHS

## **The Challenge of Jewish Spirituality to Christian Faith**

DR. JOHN C. MERKLE

## **Who Needs God?**

RABBI HAROLD S. KUSHNER

## **How Jews Pray**

RABBI BARRY CYTRON

## **Catholic Prayer – A Distinctive Flower on Jewish Roots**

REV. ROBERT M. SCHWARTZ

# **1991 Lecture Series**

UNIVERSITY OF  
**St. Thomas**



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**Proceedings of the Center for Jewish-Christian Learning  
1991 Lecture Series**

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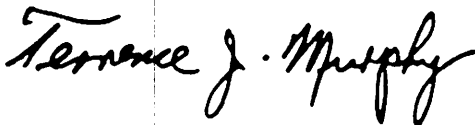
Dear Reader:

All of us at the University of St. Thomas as well as our friends and guests enjoyed the quality programs presented by the Center for Jewish-Christian Learning during 1990. This volume continues our practice of making the center's activities available to the wider public in a form useful to students and scholars alike.

The Center for Jewish-Christian Learning has concluded a memorable year. Surely 1990 can be seen as its finest year. The center, which was established only five years ago, has been acclaimed for its creative programming and distinguished for stimulating religious and cultural thought by Jews and Christians alike.

We publish these *Proceedings* in keeping with the center's mission, based on the vision outlined in the Second Vatican Council's document *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Times), which more than a quarter of a century ago called for improved relations between Catholics and Jews. May this volume enrich your understanding of Jewish-Christian relations and may it stand as a testimony of our firm intent to encourage a high level of friendly intellectual exchange between Jews and Christians.

Sincerely yours,



Rev. Msgr. Terrence J. Murphy  
President



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# Editor's Preface

This sixth volume of the center's *Proceedings* is marked by a great deal of change. To begin, less than a year ago our school was known as the College of St. Thomas, a name it carried for over 100 years; today we are the University of St. Thomas. This change was made to better identify and reflect what we are as an institution. Previous volumes of this publication were smaller. This has changed as well, for this volume, our largest, includes six essays on quite diverse topics. Also, we were delighted to be informed by the editors of *Religion Index Two* that our *Proceedings* are now indexed in their publication. This will permit students and scholars alike access to our publication.

The first essay, a dialogue that occurred in spring 1990, focused on political issues facing Jewish-Christian dialogue and featured as its convener Mrs. Geri Joseph with Father Robert F. Drinan, S.J., and Rabbi David N. Saperstein as resource persons. Father Drinan's remarks centered around Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union, Zionism, the Holocaust, civil rights, and opposition to the death penalty. Rabbi Saperstein's reflections dwelt on the role of religion in American public life, the values that Judaism gave to Western civilization, freedom of speech and religion, abortion, and nuclear holocaust. The essay (dialogue) is followed by a series of spirited questions and answers refereed by Mrs. Geri Joseph.

The second set of essays deals with what we can learn from each other's religious traditions about the practice of our spirituality. Dr. Carol Ochs in her essay, *What Jews Can Learn From Christianity*, maintains that a truly wise person is one who can learn from all people and shows how Jews can learn from Christians. She presents four great "silences" that are found in Judaism, namely, spirituality itself, prayer, one's relationship to God, and God's nature. She states, however, that while Jews may be silent on these four, Christians are not, and so Jews may be able to learn from Christians how to wrestle with the "silences." On the other hand, Dr. John C. Merkle in his essay, *The Challenge of Jewish Spirituality to Christian Faith*, presents a new kind of crossing over into Judaism on the part of Christians. Whereas in the past Christians crossed over into Judaism to dismiss its validity, today they are searching for their antecedent religious roots, which always have been nurtured in the fertile soil of both biblical and subsequent Judaism. Dr. Merkle is quick to point out that Christians who cross over into Judaism can discover the need to value the Jewish emphasis on the oneness or unity of God, the anguish and suffering of God with His people, the importance of *Torah*, and the family setting for spirituality. Both essays merit a careful reading.

In the essay *Who Needs God?* renowned author and lecturer Rabbi Harold S. Kushner presents his central thesis as "... in contemporary society people have become so sophisticated, so modern, so intellectual, that they simply don't have room for the faith commitment to God and the religious community anymore, and they don't realize what they have given up when they have learned to live this way." Rabbi Kushner proposes a

return to reverence for God and the religious community, something he feels is being blocked by modern technology, which cannot inspire or provide forgiveness when needed or address loneliness. The essay is filled with inspirational anecdotes and concludes that "without a God, man is so alone in a world which is too vast, too cold, and too unmanageable for him." The essay is followed with a series of selected audience questions (and responses) that were posed by Rabbi Max A. Shapiro to Rabbi Kushner following his presentation.

The final two essays deal with how Jews and Catholics pray. Rabbi Barry Cytron presents the reader with the various types of blessings that are found within the Jewish tradition and shows the integral role they play in the prayer life of the Jewish community. On the other hand, Father Robert M. Schwartz, in his essay, *Catholic Prayer - A Distinct Flower on Jewish Roots*, attempts to look at what Catholics hold in common with Jews, such as the use of the Psalms, the Hebrew Scriptures, and Jesus' Jewish lineage. He does, however, go on to wrestle with some unique aspects of Catholic prayer, such as the Trinity, the Communion of Saints, and the celebration of the Eucharist. Each essay should prove to be interesting to the reader.

The essays appear in chronological order of presentation on campus and have been faithfully transcribed and edited in consultation with the authors. A photograph and brief biographical sketch of each author are included.

No publication is ever the product of any one individual. The editor wishes to acknowledge Rabbi Max A. Shapiro for his constant support and encouragement, as well as Karen Schierman, a student worker at the center, for her invaluable assistance. Special thanks for layout, design and proofreading go to Tom Couillard and the University Relations staff here at St. Thomas. Finally, sincere appreciation is expressed to Sue Moro for word processing and to Roger Rich for various photographs that appear in the publication.

In an attempt to be sensitive to the fragile environment in which we live, *Proceedings* is printed on recyclable paper. In addition, we have altered the design and layout to make it more readable.

It is hoped that this sixth volume of *Proceedings* will prove to be yet another contribution to and a ready resource for the continuation of Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Dr. Arthur E. Zannoni  
Editor

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# Introduction

The calendar year 1990 not only brought to the center new insights into the Jewish-Christian relationship but also continued the unusual success its programming has had for the Twin Cities community.

We began our year continuing to conduct classes on the undergraduate level. Rabbi Barry Cytron and Rabbi Joseph Black continued to teach. At the School of Divinity, Dr. Arthur E. Zannoni maintained a full schedule, and I had an opportunity to lecture to two sections of students on Judaism and Jewish life. I also met with individual School of Divinity and undergraduate students to discuss papers they were writing that needed input from a Jewish source.

Twelve of our School of Divinity students, accompanied by Father Philip Rask, spent the fall 1990 semester in Jerusalem at the Tantur Institute and took courses at my alma mater, the Jerusalem campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

Our community outreach increased. I spoke to the Serra Clubs of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and to a number of other service clubs in our area. I traveled to Grinnell, Iowa, to speak to the United Church of Christ. Dr. Zannoni also was busy speaking at area churches about our programs. He also brought School of Divinity students to the annual desert Seder provided for them by Temple Israel of Minneapolis. Also, our center was a co-sponsor of the program "American Influence on God Language," held at Temple Israel in April 1990.

In May 1990 we invited Father Robert F. Drinan, S.J., and Rabbi David N. Saperstein to our campus to discuss *Political Issues Facing Jewish-Christian Dialogue*. This program was moderated by Mrs. Geri Joseph, senior fellow at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and former U.S. ambassador to the Netherlands. Their papers and dialogue appear in this issue of the *Proceedings*. Approximately 500 individuals came to hear them.

In June 1990 we celebrated the conclusion of our fifth year as a center, with a dinner for our founders, faculty, staff and friends and the issuing of a pamphlet, *From Dream to Reality*, outlining our five years of existence and listing the names of our benefactors.

Early in 1990 we decided that our fall programs would be in the area of theology. So on Oct. 17, 1990, we asked Dr. Carol Ochs of Simmons College in the Boston area and Dr. John C. Merkle of the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minn., to discuss *Crossing Over in Jewish and Christian Spiritualities*. Our hope was to have the Jewish community perceive what it could learn from Catholic spirituality and the Catholic community to learn what it could gain from Jewish spirituality. Some 500 individuals attended these lectures.

On Oct. 30, 1990, our speaker was Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, author of *Who Needs God*. This program was our first Beverly and Sidney Cohen Lecture. It was held at Temple Israel in Minneapolis with the cooperation of the temple's Interfaith Committee. Every available space at the Temple was filled – it is estimated that there were 2,500 in the audience – and we were told that almost an equal number had to be turned away. What made the evening a greater success from our perspective was that Rabbi Kushner was

interviewed on local television, and his talk was broadcast on a local public radio station Nov. 29. Kushner referred to our center's programming as foremost of its kind in the country.

From Nov. 4-7, 1990, Dr. Zannoni, associate director of the center and editor of these *Proceedings*, Karen Schierman, our colleague, and I attended the 12th National Workshop on Christian-Jewish Relations in Chicago. There, for the first time, a private meeting brought together all of the directors and associates of centers similar to ours. Each center has its particular focus, and the exchange of ideas, concepts and programmatic thrusts was most helpful. We also learned that ours is the oldest continuous center of its kind, the only one that is an integral part of a university with a school of divinity, with an annual publication, and with a rabbi as its director.

On Nov. 13, 1990, we had the third of our theology programs: *How Jews and Catholics Pray*. Rabbi Barry Cytron of Adath Jeshurun Congregation in Minneapolis and Father Robert M. Schwartz of the faculty of our own School of Divinity presented their papers. The Brady Educational Center auditorium on our campus, which seats 300, was full. We had difficulty closing the program, so numerous were the questions, and many of those present remained afterward to converse with our speakers.

In that same month, in response to a growing number of racial and anti-Semitic incidents in the Twin Cities, I called together leaders of our various faith communities to reinstitute the Minnesota Council on Religion and Race. We asked our local office of the National Conference of Christians and Jews to continue with this project.

We closed our sixth year with the publication of these *Proceedings*, issued May 9, 1991, the day of our program *Lest We Forget: The Holocaust and the 21st Century ... Reflections of a Jew, a Catholic, and a Protestant*.

As always, I must thank our staff, Dr. Zannoni and Karen Schierman, for helping to make our center what it is; Dr. Zannoni for his creativity, his energy, his learning and enthusiasm; Karen for her counsel and for presiding over our office with eagerness and maximal efficiency; and then there is Monsignor Terrence J. Murphy, president of the University of St. Thomas, for his continuous support and interest. Every program we propose is brought to him for his approval and advice. We also thank Father Charles Froehle, rector vice president of the School of Divinity; Sister Mary Christine Athans, B.V.M.; Rabbi Barry Cytron; Father Arthur L. Kennedy; the School of Divinity staff; and the staff of our University Relations office for their continued and willing assistance. And then there is Mr. Sidney Cohen. He was an initiator of the center and his continued involvement in its welfare has buoyed us all.

On Dec. 21, 1990, the university honored me with a doctor of humane letters (*honoris causa*). I was deeply moved by the recognition the university has given to our center and to me as its director.

Rabbi Max A. Shapiro  
Director



THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS TODAY  
HONORS WITH ITS DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF HUMANE LETTERS

## RABBI MAX A. SHAPIRO

WHEN RABBI MAX A. SHAPIRO RETIRED IN 1985 AS SENIOR RABBI OF TEMPLE ISRAEL IN MINNEAPOLIS, HE CONCLUDED A 30-YEAR CAREER THAT BEGAN AND ENDED WITH ONE CONGREGATION. IN THOSE 30 YEARS THAT CONGREGATION HAD GROWN FROM 800 FAMILIES TO 1,850 FAMILIES, ONE OF THE 10 LARGEST REFORM JEWISH CONGREGATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES, AND MAX A. SHAPIRO HAD BECOME ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL CLERGY IN MINNESOTA.

SMALL WONDER! THE IRREPRESSIBLE TEACHER, ORATOR AND SCHOLAR FROM BOSTON RARELY PAUSED LONG ENOUGH EVEN TO ACCEPT THE MYRIAD AWARDS AND HONORS LAVISHED UPON HIM THROUGH THOSE YEARS.

SINCE HIS STUDENT DAYS AT BOSTON PUBLIC LATIN SCHOOL, CLARK UNIVERSITY, AND BOSTON TEACHERS COLLEGE, MAX A. SHAPIRO HAS BEEN AN EXTRAORDINARY ACHIEVER.

WHEN HE DECIDED AT AGE 33 TO STUDY TO BECOME A RABBI, HE ALREADY HAD BEEN A SUCCESSFUL TEACHER, AN OVERSEAS VETERAN OF WORLD WAR II, AND A BUSINESSMAN WITH A WIFE AND TWO CHILDREN.

HE COMPLETED THE SIX-YEAR COURSE OF STUDIES AT HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION WITHIN FIVE YEARS AND SIMULTANEOUSLY EARNED A DOCTORATE IN EDUCATION FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI. HE WAS ORDAINED A RABBI IN 1955 AND IMMEDIATELY BEGAN HIS 30-YEAR TENURE AT TEMPLE ISRAEL.

THE DAY AFTER HIS RETIREMENT, WHICH RABBI SHAPIRO HAS DESCRIBED AS THE BRIEFEST RETIREMENT IN RECORDED HISTORY, HE ASSUMED HIS NEW RESPONSIBILITIES AS DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS.

FOUNDED IN 1985, THE CENTER WAS DESIGNED TO GO FAR BEYOND THE SCOPE OF JEWISH-CHRISTIAN CENTERS AT OTHER COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES. RABBI SHAPIRO ENVISIONED A CENTER WHERE JEWS AND CHRISTIANS COULD MEET TO DISCUSS FRANKLY ALL ASPECTS OF THEIR RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL LIVES.

IT WAS TO BE A PLACE WHERE ETHICAL, MORAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND SOCIAL ISSUES COULD BE AIRED CANDIDLY IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF TOLERANCE AND MUTUAL RESPECT, NOT ONLY FOR THE ST. THOMAS COMMUNITY BUT ALSO FOR THE WIDER COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE.

THAT THE CENTER HAS EXCEEDED ITS FOUNDERS' MOST AMBITIOUS PROJECTIONS IS ATTESTED TO BY SUCH NOTABLES AS JOSEPH CARDINAL BERNARDIN, WHO SAID THE CENTER HAS MADE THE TWIN CITIES ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL REGIONS IN THE UNITED STATES FOR THE PROMOTION OF CHRISTIAN-JEWISH DIALOGUE, AND BY NOBEL PRIZE RECIPIENT ELIE WIESEL, WHO CALLED THE CENTER "UNIQUE AND BLESSED" AND WENT ON TO SAY,

"I KNOW OF NO OTHER CENTER, DEDICATED NOT TO ACADEMIC DEGREES, BUT TO THE LEARNING TOGETHER BETWEEN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS THAT CREATES DEEPER UNDERSTANDING AMONG PEOPLE."

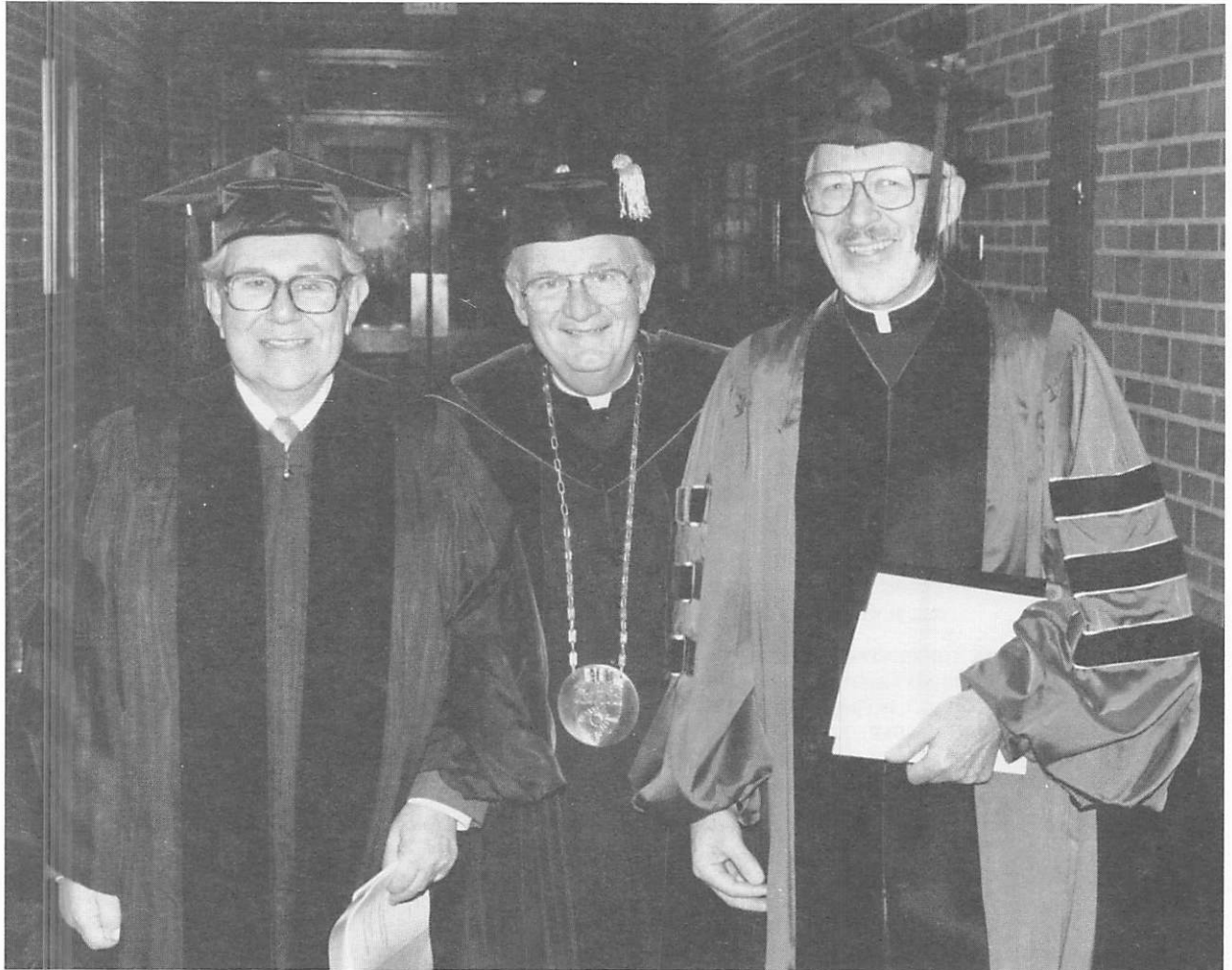
THESE ACCOLADES AND THE REMARKABLE SUCCESS OF THE CENTER FOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN LEARNING ARE DUE IN LARGE PART TO THE UNTIRING EFFORTS, DETERMINATION, OPTIMISM, SINCERITY, GENUINE FRIENDLINESS, EBULLIENCE, AND THE SIMPLE, PROFOUND FAITH OF RABBI MAX A. SHAPIRO.

HE HAS BEEN AN EXCEPTIONAL AMBASSADOR OF GOODWILL AND HAS SERVED WITH DISTINCTION AS THE CENTER'S DIRECTOR.

THROUGH THE CENTER FOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN LEARNING RABBI SHAPIRO HAS UNDERScoreD THE LOFTIEST TRADITION OF LEARNING, WHICH IS DEEPLY APPRECIATED BY MEMBERS OF HIS OWN COMMUNITY AS WELL AS BY THE COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS.

BECAUSE YOU, RABBI MAX A. SHAPIRO, REPRESENT AND DEMONSTRATE THE HIGHEST IDEALS OF A COMMUNITY OF FAITH AND A NOBLE TRADITION THAT COMPELS US TO STRIVE FOR THE DIGNITY AND WORTH OF EACH HUMAN PERSON, AND BECAUSE OF YOUR UNYIELDING COMMITMENT TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE CENTER FOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN LEARNING, WE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS GRATEFULLY AND FONDLY SALUTE YOU AND BID YOU "AD MEA-V'ESRIM," AS WE PROUDLY CONFER UPON YOU THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF HUMANE LETTERS, *HONORIS CAUSA*.

CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE CONFERRING OF THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF HUMANE LETTERS, *HONORIS CAUSA*  
GIVEN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS THE TWENTY-FIRST DAY OF DECEMBER, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND NINETY.



*Honorary degrees were conferred at St. Thomas winter commencement ceremonies Dec. 21, 1990, by Monsignor Terrence J. Murphy, center, on Rabbi Max A. Shapiro, left, director of the Center for Jewish-Christian Learning, and on the Rev. Hilary D. Thimmesh, O.S.B., president of St. John's University, Collegeville, Minn.*

# Political Issues Facing Jewish-Christian Dialogue

REV. ROBERT F. DRINAN, S.J.  
MRS. GERI JOSEPH  
RABBI DAVID N. SAPERSTEIN

## 1991 Lecture Series

UNIVERSITY OF  
St. Thomas



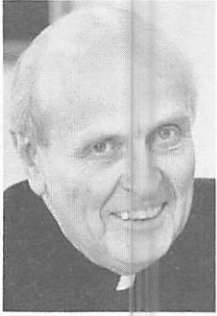
CENTER FOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN LEARNING

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# Political Issues Facing Jewish-Christian Dialogue

On the evening of Monday, May 3, 1990, Rev. Robert F. Drinan, S.J., Rabbi David N. Saperstein and Mrs. Geri Joseph discussed issues surrounding American politics and the dialogue between Jews and Christians. What follows is a biographical sketch and photograph of each of the participants as well as a carefully edited transcription of their remarks.

## Participants



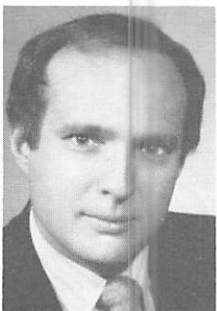
**Rev. Robert F. Drinan, S.J.**

**Rev. Robert F. Drinan, S.J.**, is a priest of the Society of Jesus, lawyer, statesman, professor, author, and former member of the U.S. House of Representatives. He represented the Fourth District of Massachusetts from 1971 to 1981 and served on a variety of House committees. He currently is professor of law at Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C. Before serving in government he was dean and professor of law (1956-1970) at Boston College Law School, Newton, Mass. A prolific writer, he is the author of seven books, most recently *Cry of the Oppressed – The History and Hope of the Human Rights Revolution* (Harper & Row, 1987), and he is editor in chief of *Family Law Quarterly*. Since 1980 he has been a columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter*, and he regularly contributes articles to *America*, *Christian Century*, *London Tablet*, and the *Boston Herald*. Drinan has received honorary doctorate degrees from 20 colleges and universities in the United States and is a member of many scholarly societies and associations; he serves on the advisory board of the Union of Councils of Soviet Jews and the national board of trustees of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. He is a member of the District of Columbia Bar, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Bar, and the U.S. Supreme Court Bar.



**Mrs. Geri Joseph**

**Mrs. Geri Joseph** is a senior fellow at the Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, with primary responsibility for international programs. Trained as a journalist, she has received many awards and honors; she was staff writer and columnist from 1946 to 1953 and contributing editor from 1972 to 1978 for the *Minneapolis Tribune*. Joseph has been active in many volunteer civic organizations, working in areas of mental health, politics and government, women's affairs, young people and education, and has been director of numerous business and civic boards. She is a founding member of the Minnesota Women's Campaign Fund and currently co-chairs Minnesota Meets the Soviet Union, a statewide program. Long active in Democratic politics, she served on commissions under three Democratic presidential administrations and was elected to what was the top national Democratic women's post: vice chair and director of women's activities. In 1978 she was named U.S. ambassador to the Netherlands, where she served until 1981. Joseph served as convener and moderator of the program. She and her husband, Burton M. Joseph, reside in the Twin Cities.



**Rabbi David N. Saperstein**

**Rabbi David N. Saperstein** is co-director and counsel of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington, D.C. The center is the liaison between the Reform Jewish movement and the federal government. He has held leadership positions in national coalitions dealing with issues as diverse as Israel, civil rights, energy and the environment, and nuclear disarmament. He also is an attorney and an adjunct professor in comparative Jewish and American law at Georgetown University Law School. A prolific writer and a well-known speaker, Saperstein has appeared on numerous national network television news and talk shows. His articles about political and social justice issues have been published in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and many Jewish periodicals. He has written or edited five books, including *The Social Action Manual: A Practical Guide for Organizing and Programming Social Action in the Synagogue*. Saperstein is married to Ellen Weiss, executive producer of National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*.



## Political Issues Facing Jewish-Christian Dialogue

Mrs. Geri Joseph, Convener

Before introducing our speakers, I would like to congratulate the Center for Jewish-Christian Learning, which, with the cooperation of the School of Divinity, is bringing us together this evening. There was a time, and really not so long ago, when bringing people together for a Jewish-Christian dialogue would have been all but impossible and in some countries, as we know, it still is. After all, just 25 years have passed since the Second Vatican Council launched the ecumenical process with a series of 16 documents, one of which was known as *Nostra Aetate*. This document launched the serious dialogue between Jews and Catholics. But while we have come a long way in our ability to talk with each other, in our efforts to understand each other, the fact remains that there are still issues that cut deeply between us, issues that torment us and divide us, highly emotional issues that often pit one group's moralities against another's, and when morality comes into the picture, those are the hardest issues of all.

In the brochure announcing this event, it says that we will "attempt to address the complex political, religious and social issues facing Americans" and that we will discuss "issues such as church-state relations, Israel, women's rights, the homeless, the economy, the environment, and religious freedom as aspects of the dialogue between Jews and Christians." That list is what you might call a very heavy agenda. I suspect that not even our two eminently qualified speakers can do justice to all of those issues in the time we have this evening. But given their talents and their experience and their past responses to challenges, they just might try, and your questions following their comments will be helpful.

And now it is my pleasure to introduce our two speakers. Interestingly enough, there are many similarities between these two men. Both are lawyers and teachers. As a matter of fact, at the moment they both are teaching at the same university, Georgetown. They are people who have chosen to serve their religion; one is a rabbi and one is a priest, and each is a prolific writer of articles and books – although Father Drinan has a slight edge in the book department – and both have been deeply involved in many organizations that deal with civil and human rights, and very broadly with a more livable country and world. Both are men of liberal views and I, for one, will be fascinated to hear what issues divide them, if any.

Let's start with Rabbi David N. Saperstein. He is currently co-director and counsel for the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington, an organization that serves as liaison between the Reform Jewish movement and the federal government. He is also adjunct professor in comparative Jewish and American law at Georgetown University Law School. Since moving to Washington in 1973, Rabbi Saperstein has held leadership positions in national coalitions dealing with issues as diverse as Israel, civil rights, energy and the environment,

abortion rights, and nuclear disarmament. He has chaired four national interreligious coalitions and now serves on the boards and executive committees of more than 30 national organizations, including the NAACP, Common Cause, People for the American Way, and The Leadership Conference for Civil Rights. He has participated in numerous network television news and talk shows, and his articles on political and social justice issues have appeared in the Washington Post, the New York Times, and other publications. He has written and edited five books, including *Critical Issues Facing Reform Judaism* and *Preventing the Nuclear Holocaust*. And for those of you who listen to a very excellent program called All Things Considered on National Public Radio, you may be interested to know that he is married to that program's executive producer, Ellen Weiss, and for those of you who have felt for a long time that there is really something pretty good and catching in a family environment it will perhaps come as no surprise that Rabbi Saperstein's father, Harold, is also a distinguished member of the rabbinate as is his brother and an uncle.

And now to Father Robert F. Drinan, S.J. Since he was ordained a Jesuit priest in 1953, Father Drinan has had a number of careers. He was dean of the Boston College Law School for 14 years and taught classes in family law, philosophy of law, and church-state relations among other subjects. Leaving the comparative quiet of academic life in 1971, he ran for Congress from the Fourth District of Massachusetts and was elected to the House of Representatives, where he served for a decade, and he told me this evening he really still kind of misses it. Since 1980 he has been a columnist for the National Catholic Reporter and regularly contributes articles to other magazines and newspapers. He is the author of seven books, most recently, a history of the human rights struggle called *Cry of the Oppressed*. Like Rabbi Saperstein, he has served and currently serves on an incredible number of committees and boards, including the Advisory Board of the Union of Councils of Soviet Jews and the national board of trustees of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. For seven years he chaired the International Committee for the Release of Anatoly Sharansky. His achievements have won him no fewer than 20 honorary doctorates from prestigious colleges and universities across the United States. I am sure that this audience will agree with me that we are fortunate indeed to have two speakers of such impressive credentials to speak to us tonight.

And now, the ground rules. Father Drinan will speak first for about 20 to 25 minutes. He will then be followed by Rabbi Saperstein, who will get equal time. At the conclusion of their comments, each will raise whatever questions he wishes with the other and then I, as convener, am also allowed to join in that little act.

### Father Robert F. Drinan

For many years I have heard about the wonderful quality and prestige of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul. I know that you all commend, as I do, Monsignor Terrence J. Murphy for all the leadership he has given over such a wonderful



period of time. I also commend this program and particularly Rabbi Max A. Shapiro and Dr. Arthur E. Zannoni along with everyone else involved. Looking at this lovely program this evening, I remembered that I was instrumental in starting a Catholic-Jewish dialogue in Boston in the early 1960s. I recall, very vividly, in the second year of that program talking with a Catholic judge coming out of a three-hour dialogue between Catholics and Jews.

The judge said to me: "I am very grateful to you and to Boston College, because I feel ashamed that although I am 55 years old and have been a judge for nine years, I have never spoken with a Jewish rabbi in my whole life." The judge was a graduate of Holy Cross College and Harvard Law School.

I know that we have to continue to open up the lines of communication and see the whole world together, because we as Christians and Jews are all the children of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Let me talk with you about three points. First, there are signs of hope everywhere that we are becoming much more civilized in our ecumenical relationships. We Christians, more than ever before in the entire history of Christianity, are thinking of the dreadful things that Christians have done to Jews through the centuries. It may well be that more has been accomplished in Christian-Jewish relations over the last 20 years than had been done in the previous 20 centuries.

Secondly, I want to talk with you about the continuing misunderstandings between these two religious groups. Third, I want to make some recommendations.

I know that there is a whole new world out there today. Frankly, when I got this invitation a few months back, I never thought that tonight we would be witnessing what we are seeing all around the world. Eastern Europe coming back to democracy, human rights being asserted in the Soviet Union, and even South Africa trying to join the world of equality. We know that the Cold War is over. This is something that we had never anticipated as happening in our lifetime. The 40 years of coexistence and terror are coming to an end and humanity, I like to think, has learned something from the Holocaust and from World War II, and from the emphasis on human rights that has come about since 1945. Would that the United States would ratify all of the human rights treaties and put the emphasis more on a world government! I have the dream these days that we will have a permanent Nuremberg, an international criminal commission, and that we will be able to try all those international criminals in that tribunal.

Why is it that Eastern Europe has found itself? Why is it that Gorbachev has set Communism aside? There are thousands of reasons, but I would like to think that perhaps here in the United States we are doing something right. Maybe, just maybe, the Christians and the Jewish community have been thinking together and finally the peoples of the world recognize that our legacy as Americans and as people who believe in the God of Abraham is a true and acceptable religion that emphasizes human rights and human dignities.

In any event, this is a day and an hour of triumph for the

Jews of the Soviet Union. Today in the New York Times, there is a long story about the Jews of Odessa. It seems that in the next five years, two-thirds of the 70,000 Jews in Odessa will leave and go to Israel. A few will come to the United States. For once in the history of the Soviet Union, the identification of a Jew on the required ID card is a benefit to the holders of that card, because now they can get out of the Soviet Union. It is distressing, however, to know that they feel obliged to leave their homeland, because they are terrified of the growing anti-Semitism. There is an organization, Pamyat, that apparently poses as a group believing in traditional values in the Soviet Union, but actually, it is an organization that is going back to the worst forms of anti-Semitism of the czars. There are probably a million and a half Jews in the Soviet Union. We do not know how many will leave, but it seems that it is possible that in the next five years 500,000 Soviet Jews will in fact arrive in Israel.

In Odessa, however, they fear a pogrom as they had in 1905. Pamyat is bringing out the worst of anti-Semitism, both of the czars and of the Communists.

But I was thrilled to read in the recent past about the revival of Judaism in the Soviet Union. There is now a Hebrew day school open in Moscow. Ninety students learn every day both Midrash and mathematics. There are classes in Hebrew springing up all over the Soviet Union. Another day school started recently in Riga. Shalom Theater recently opened in Moscow and a Jewish film festival is about to be organized. There is a group that seeks to be an umbrella organization of more than 200 Jewish groups across the Soviet Union. This new organization has not yet received official recognition from the government but that is anticipated.

One hundred and ten synagogues are functioning now in the Soviet Union. While that number sounds high, it is very small because the community of one million and a half or more of Jews in the Soviet Union constitutes the third largest Jewish community in the world.

I recall seeing nothing like this when I was in Moscow and Leningrad some years ago. The temple was so forlorn. And whenever I think of Soviet Jews, I recall very vividly the first time I was in Israel in 1963. The guide took us to the tomb of Herzl and said casually that Herzl established the nation of Israel so that the 3 million Soviet Jews, when finally they were able to come out of that country, would have a place to go to. The dream of Zionism and the dream envisioned by Theodor Herzl are now in operation, and for that we should be grateful!

There are clouds, of course, over this development. But it seems to me that we should look at the fact that this is an entirely new world. The influx into Israel this month was just astonishing: 10,480 Soviet Jews arrived in April 1990. Last year there were only 544 in April coming to Israel. The Jews in the Soviet Union fear that the door may close again and that is why they are leaving in such large numbers. The problems that these people will confront in Israel are very acute. Although Israel is planning to put up 100,000 housing units for new families, not a single one of them is yet complete.

We could say, therefore, that Zionism is flowering; however, the virus of anti-Semitism is still there in the Soviet Union and I am afraid, frankly, that it has metastasized into the Arab world; nonetheless, looking back over the last 20 years, we should say that a miracle has happened. At least 350,000 Soviet Jews have been able to emigrate since the year 1970. It seems to me that this may well help Israel in significant ways. By the year 2000, there will be 4.2 million Jews in Israel and 3.1 million Arabs. But by the year 2020, unless something happens, the Arabs will be in the majority. That, of course, does not apply to the pre-1967 boundaries; Jews will still outnumber Arabs 4-to-1 in the old Israel.

Zionism, therefore, is alive and very vigorous. We can rejoice in that. But it seems to me that we have to come to the chronic misunderstandings between Christians and Jews. Can anti-Semitism ever be curbed? Can it be annihilated? We like to think that racism and sexism can, in fact, be eliminated by education. Christians look at the situation worldwide. We are still distressed, as everyone in this room is, at what happened at the United Nations in 1975. At that time 72 nations, two-thirds of humanity, voted for that hideous proposition that Zionism is a form of racism. The United States and all of us should continue to work to change that. We must labor so that the United Nations will make an affirmative statement that Zionism is one of the great liberation movements in the modern world.

Can Christian churches somehow join with Islam and educate both Christians and Moslems out of anti-Semitism? I think that that is a goal that we should implement.

There is nothing fundamentally anti-Israel or anti-Semitic either in Christianity or in Islam. Certainly the Moslems and Christians have veneration of all of the Jewish truths and the Jewish prophets. There is no logical or theological reason for anti-Semitism; in fact, anti-Semitism is the complete repudiation of Christianity. The Catholic Church, 25 years ago, set out all of that in *Nostra Aetate*; however, it seems to me as a Christian that there has to be more done and said by the Catholic Church. As you know, in *Nostra Aetate*, there was no reference to the Holocaust or to the existence and presence of the state of Israel. It seems to me that we have to go back and say that we lament the Holocaust. I like to think that Christians have learned a lot but I am afraid that they are tending to forget it.

I am very proud of the part I played, a small part, in the

erection of the Holocaust memorial in Washington. I wish only that Christians would contribute some share of the \$100 million or more that is being spent for this monument to the Holocaust, which will be on the Mall in Washington in the shadow of the monuments to George Washington, Lincoln and Jefferson.

Fifty-four million Catholics, it seems to me, could and should make a contribution. I would hope that we might take up a collection so that we would participate in our nation forming a memorial to the Holocaust in a central place in Washington. It seems to me also that the Holy See and the whole Catholic Church has to move forward and offer diplomatic recognition to Israel. The technical reasons that the

Holy See offers is that it does not recognize new nations until all of the borders are finalized. Historically that is true. But it seems to me that as the Holy See established formal diplomatic ties with the new nations of Africa, the Vatican should make a special effort so that Israel is not isolated as being one of the few nations of the earth without diplomatic recognition by Rome.

The Catholic Church, it seems to me, and all of us should be very zealous in the next several months in aiding the last Exodus. I am happy that the Congress is about to appropriate \$400 million for the ingathering of the exiles in Israel. I would like to see Christians worldwide – people who at least indirectly caused the persecution of the Jews in the Soviet Union – participate morally and financially in the resettlement of the Soviet Jews in Israel.

What are some of my recommendations? Let me just say that

we should concentrate on theology. That is why I think that this important center at the University of St. Thomas has an overwhelming significance. You are concentrating not merely on the day-to-day political things but on the large question of why Christians and Jews have been apart on so many issues through the decades and through the centuries.

This is really inconsistent with the theology of Christianity. Christians and Jews believe that God revealed Himself in history; we are the only peoples who believe that. The Moslem faith believes it to some extent, but clearly the Oriental religions have nothing like what the Jews and the Christians have in believing that God has intervened directly in history.

We are all the followers of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They brought God into the world. God chose the Jews



**Mrs. Geri Joseph convenes the dialogue between Father Robert F. Drinan, S.J., and Rabbi David N. Saperstein.**

as the vehicle by which He would give His revelation to the world; consequently, Judaism is a vibrant, ongoing revelation of God Himself. Judaism is sacred. It is an essential part of Christianity, and as a Catholic priest I read every day the Psalms written by the Jewish poets and prophets. The love of God and the love of man are the central doctrines of both Judaism and Christianity.

It seems to me that we ought to say, looking at the Jewish people in the entire world today, that the ingathering of the exiles in Israel is a part of God's plan. I am certain that God is pleased now that after all of these centuries his chosen people finally have their own homeland.

And so I welcome the idea that is in the Declaration of Independence of Israel. I would hope that not merely Jews would rejoice but Christians would rejoice in the establishment of Israel. Obviously, we have a heavy commitment as Christians and as Americans to the safety and security of Israel.

Because of Christian beliefs in this country, the Congress and the country have since the beginning of Israel said that we will guarantee its safety. We have followed Israel through all of these four decades. I and all Christians have guilt over the Holocaust; we have guilt over all the revelations in the marvelous book by David Wyman called *The Abandonment of the Jews*.

In America there is a deep, deep desire that Israel should flower. From Truman to Reagan, Americans have made a commitment that Israel will remain strong. The \$3 billion in American aid goes out this year and, hopefully, as long as it is necessary to Israel.

I would hope that no substantial curtailing of aid that is necessary to Israel will happen in the Congress or in the country.

I am not going to pontificate making recommendations for what Israel should be doing at this time. I have always been with the position of the Labor Party. I recall vividly talking with Abba Eban in 1968. He said in his eloquent way that Israel would have to make some disposition of the West Bank and Gaza. He did not want to have the Palestinians or the Arabs as a part of the nation of Israel. As you know, through political happenstance and negligence, it has not been possible to make some arrangements for the inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza.

United Nations Resolutions 224 and 338 have tried, along with the Camp David Accords of President Carter.

I commend to you an article in Time magazine by Charles Krauthammer of February 26, 1990. This author raises issues that other people are not bringing up. He states that we are asking Israel, which has had 40 years of war, to act as if it had no problem whatsoever. He mentions that the Palestinians declared that their mission is to bring about the abolition of the state of Israel. Mr. Krauthammer raises the question: "Do many Americans have a double standard in judging Israel?"

We all know that this is a tormenting question. Every day we pray that there will be some resolution of the problems in Israel.

I am not certain that a cutback by Congress in the funds for Israel, which some people recommend so easily, would be wise. Such a drastic measure would make the Likud government even more adamant and the right wing even more desperate to do something that we would disapprove.

And so we come to the question as to what we in America should do. We look at the whole world that is being transformed before our very eyes. We ask what we can do as Christians and Jews in the United States. We have had struggles in our two communities over the last generation or two. I would like to think that the differences over things such as church-state matters are now being resolved.

I think that Catholics and Jews still have great work to do together as we always have done in the area of civil rights. The leadership conference that embraces all of our congregations is now working, as never before, for the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1990. There are tensions between the Christians and the Jewish communities in America on affirmative action, and on other matters – particularly with reference to minorities. I hope, nonetheless, that Catholics and Jews in the next decade can continue to do to what they have been doing since 1963, when all of us came together at the First National Conference on Race and Religion in Chicago. There 1,200 people of all denominations made a beautiful statement that laid the groundwork for the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. None of this work is over. We still have every eighth American whose parents, or grandparents, or ancestors came from Africa. We have a long way to go before we can say that there is interracial justice in this country.

I hope also that the Catholics and the Jews of this country recognize that all of us are opposed to the death penalty. I do not know a single Jewish organization that would recommend the death penalty. The U.S. Catholic bishops have firmly opposed the death penalty and virtually all of the Protestant denominations have done so. Yet we look tonight, my dear friends, and see that there are 2,300 people on death row in the United States. The death penalty is unknown in any civilized country of the world.

Does the United States want to be with China and South Africa, which alone among major nations are still sanctioning the death penalty?

We must look to the fact that in the next decade 1.2 billion more people will be added to the global village. Obviously, there is no preparation or planning for this vast increase in the world's population. Every day 40,000 children die needlessly of malnutrition. There are still 800 million people who are chronically malnourished.

Some wise Jewish theologian some time ago stated that modern-day Christians must have their own Midrash. A Midrash is the most intimate dialogue between the despairing human soul and its creator. Christianity after both Auschwitz and the founding of Israel must conduct its own Midrash and what Christians must do is eliminate every possibility of another Holocaust and to prevent the destruction of Israel.

Until or unless Christians conduct an exhaustive Midrash on

those two agonizing questions, they do not have the right to call themselves persons who believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Let me close with a beautiful statement that Reinhold Niebuhr enunciated. The famous Protestant theologian said something that sums up everything we are trying to declare here tonight. Reinhold Niebuhr said: "No one can be a good Christian until first he is a good Jew."

### **Rabbi David Saperstein**

I am most pleased to be here tonight. This is a distinguished program and a distinguished audience. The speakers who you have had as part of the Center for Jewish-Christian Learning programs are some of the leading figures of religious thought in American life today. I'm honored to be part of that tradition. And I am honored to be with a chair of this session who is one of the distinguished figures in American public life. Geri Joseph has truly been a great servant of America, and all of us owe her a debt of gratitude. The Joseph family represents that which is best in both the tradition of America and Judaism.

I am pleased to be with old friends and colleagues, particularly Rabbi Max A. Shapiro, who has been such a guiding force in this center and whose congregational tenure is an exemplar of great rabbinic service; and I see as well in the audience tonight another national figure who has recently joined this community, my old and dear friend, Rabbi Leonard Schoolman. These are rabbis who bring honor to the title rabbi. But, above all, I am pleased to be with

Father Bob Drinan, one of the truly extraordinary figures in modern political history, a voice of conscience to our nation.

Perhaps the distinctive context I bring to a discussion of the role of religion in American public and political life is my work for 15 years as one of the 32 religious lobbyists, 32 national Catholic, Protestant and Jewish agencies that have full-time lobbyists in the nation's capital. We "educate" people in Washington as to why we take the positions we do. But for the rest of you, we lobby on behalf of the positions you pass in the national denominations of which you are part.

I want to begin by telling you how the Jewish tradition answers that question of what is the proper role of religion in American public life. In order to answer that question, we have to reflect a moment on what Jewish law is. Jewish law is a covenant established at Sinai between God and the Jewish

people. A covenant is, of course, a fancy name for a contract. A contract can be binding only upon people who enter into it voluntarily themselves or through an agent. It cannot be binding upon someone who does not enter into the contract. Halacha (Jewish law) is not a legal system that was ever intended to be imposed upon the entire world. Jews do not believe that God seeks for us to "Judaize" America (that is, to make Jewish law applicable to non-Jewish societies) the way some people believe they have a mission to "Christianize" America. It is, therefore, essential to note that the political answers that the Jewish tradition developed in response to the needs of a Jewish state or self-governing Jewish community over the past 3,000 years were never intended to provide a blueprint of what God mandated as the answers to the political

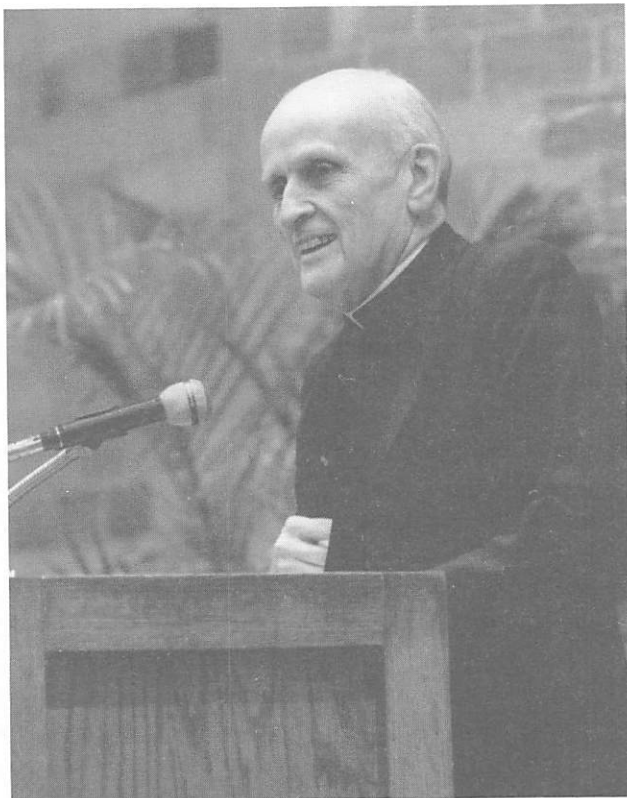
problems of a modern, secular, democratic state.

In the Jewish perspective, God has not ordained for humanity monarchies or democracies. God has not ordained capitalism or socialism. God has not ordained food-stamp programs, or, despite what some people in the last White House used to think, God has not ordained supply-side economics. These are human inventions to be assessed according to the universal and eternal values of our religious tradition. It is the extralegal principles, the extralegal values underlying the Jewish legal system that Jews believed were ordained by God to be applicable to all people, Jews and non-Jews alike. They inhere in the very nature of humankind. These assumptions and principles are considered to be eternal by the Jewish tradition, and Jews who would live up to the aspirations of

their Jewish tradition will insist that all human actions and inventions, including political programs, be measured by whether they further or impede these universal, eternal values.

Many of these values have, in fact, been absorbed into the mainstream of Western civilization. They are, thus, largely indistinguishable from Christian or modern political values since the Bible is the underpinning of much of the political ideology of the Western world, particularly modern democratic philosophy. Thus, through the acceptance of these values into Christianity and into the mainstream of Western civilization, the Jewish people have helped alter the way that the human race looks at itself and its world.

What are these universal and eternal principles and assumptions? You know them well. Let me just list a few of the key ones:



**Father Robert F. Drinan, S.J., delivers his opening remarks.**



1) The inherent dignity and importance of all humankind derived from the belief that we are all made in the image of God – the foundation of our notion of human rights.

2) The fundamental equality of all people rooted in the Jewish allegorical myths of our common descent from Eve and from Adam. “Why,” the Midrash asks us, “are we all descended from one couple? Why was Adam made from the dust of the four corners of the earth? So that none of us can say our ancestors were more worthy than your ancestors.” We are all equally children of God.

3) The capacity of all people, given the will and the right educational tools, to improve themselves and their societies.

4) The concept of wealth as representing that which is God's. “The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 24:1). This wealth is given to human owners in a trust relationship, a trust that requires, first, protecting the corpus of that trust (the foundation of Jewish environmental legislation), and second, sharing of the wealth with the less fortunate (this was the foundation of the first welfare system in the history of the world), out of which came the attendant special concern that God has mandated for the poor, the widow, the hungry, and the orphaned.

5) The rule of law, to which even the highest human ruler is held accountable – the foundation of democracy.

6) The concept of freedom, of choice and the concomitant responsibility of each person for his or her own actions. That is one of the most important contributions of Judaism to Western civilization, I would suggest; thus, while the ancient Greeks had the schools of thought like the Sophists arguing for freedom of choice, there was also the persuasive view of the fates that played games with human destiny. In Christianity, from certain interpretations of original sin to notions of predestination in Calvinism, there were limitations on human freedom.

In opposition to that, Judaism gave a very clear vision, “I have set before you this day, the blessing and curse, life and death, good and evil.” It doesn't say that, “I the Lord God am going to tell you which I am going to make you choose!” It is almost as though God is pleading with humanity, saying, “I've given to you that which I've given to nothing else in Creation, the ability to understand the difference between right and wrong. I can tell you what you should do and why, but ultimately, if my Word is to live here on earth, it will be because of the choices you make; therefore, choose life, that you and your children after you may live.”

These are some of the values that Judaism gave to Western civilization that have been absorbed and accepted by the surrounding societies, and this is the role that Judaism believes reflects our religious obligation in modern political life: to look at political questions and to argue over whether political programs further or impede these eternal values. Now we recognize that good moral people can differ over that. Every page of the Talmud is filled with differing opinions among the rabbis, each trying to understand what God asked of us. Political sin consists not of having the right answer or wrong

answer – but of abdicating the struggle to create a better world.

If this is how Judaism answered the question, “What is the role of religion in public life?” what was America's answer to the same question? To understand that we must take a brief sojourn through the history of intellectual thought. For what is at stake in the debates over the question of the role of religion in American public life is nothing less than the fundamental accomplishment of the American Revolution 200 years ago. For 2,000 years of Western civilization, prior to the establishment of the United States, the rights that an individual had were derivative rights, rights that accrued to them from some source beyond themselves, rights that were theirs by dint of membership in some economic, religious or political grouping. The source might be membership in a caste or class or a guild, or it might be membership in a religious group such as the Jewish community. The rights that Jews had for 1,500 years of European history were the rights given by the rulers to the entire Jewish community. That's why excommunication was such a great threat. Banish someone from membership in the community and they lost all their rights. You could not be an “individual citizen.” You had only two choices, join another community (convert), an abhorrent idea to most Jews, or go far away where no one knew what had happened and lie about the excommunication.

America turned that notion on its head. The founders of our nation asserted that our rights were not granted by any external sources but come from within. They believed that as a God-created human being you were endowed with certain inalienable rights, among which were life, freedom, liberty: the right to determine your own destiny (“pursuit of happiness”), the right to say what you want, the right of worship, of publication, of association with like-minded people, the right to petition your government for redress of grievances. And the role of government was not to give you those rights but to protect those rights that God had given you. The failure of government to do so was, as Jefferson argued, grounds for overturning the government. And, in a democracy, we believe that the resulting vibrant debate in the free marketplace of ideas is not only good in the abstract but is indispensable to the strength of our nation – the only means to test ideas and thereby establish truth. A religious-sounding idea? Indeed it was, for the age of reason philosophers and Diest founders of our own nation turned to our Scriptures, our common Scriptures, as the inspiration for this vision of the individual.

In the past 15 years, we have seen the rise (and perhaps the fall) of a radically different vision of America, one in which it was argued that America was established to further certain fundamental values, particularly Christian values. And if it is necessary to use the coercive laws of government legislation to tell us when we should pray (school prayer), when we should bend scientific truth to accommodate religious belief (scientific creationism), what we should read in our libraries (censorship), or see in our theaters, that was all justifiable.

But from the rise of the Moral Majority to its demise a year ago, it failed to win a single, major political victory in the U.S.

Congress. After 1980, its candidates were rejected again and again by the voters. The courts of our land, including even the Reagan-appointed Supreme Court, have continued to uphold the traditional values of separation of church and state – at least up until this month! But the bottom line has been that over the last 15 years, the rational voices of America successfully shattered a myth which the Religious Right had foisted upon America: that somehow separation of church and state was anti-God or anti-religious. Nothing could be further from the truth! It is precisely the protection of religion from government interference and manipulation that has protected religion, allowing it to grow with a diversity and strength unmatched almost anywhere in the world today.

Does this mean that religion has no role in American life? Far from it! Exactly the role that our religious tradition tells us religion should play in a secular society is the role that our founders assigned to it. As the Religious Right is fond of pointing out, our founders were religious people themselves. Yet, Rev. [Jerry] Falwell draws the wrong conclusion from that. It is not that their religiosity led them to create a system in which the state would influence or determine religious behavior, rather it was to ensure that religion could play its proper role in shaping a better nation.

It is for this goal, as well as religious freedom, that we created the wall separating church and state. You see, the term “wall” is a misnomer. The wall that Jefferson envisioned was a “one-way wall” preventing government from interfering with religion but not restricting religion at all, thereby allowing religion to play its historic role of being a goad to the conscience of America. The rights of free speech, publication and petition for religious groups or individuals, which were assigned by the Constitution to all people and organizations, are not less accorded to us as religious individuals and religious groups – including the Moral Majority and Rev. Falwell. But we prevail in shaping a society not by imposition of religious authority but only when we convince a majority of Americans, in the free marketplace of ideas, of the rightness of our views.

There are those who would still argue that we must take shortcuts through our fundamental constitutional rights to achieve some religious end. Such voices are heard today even on the Supreme Court of the United States. These voices endanger 200 years of the American experiment. And when government radiates approval for such views, it radiates

approval for a doctrine so odious it will, in the end, threaten to destroy all that we have created.

I would suggest to you we are meeting at exactly a time when that might be happening. Little noticed, even by those who care about such issues, was the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States in *Oregon Human Services vs. Smith*. The case dealt with American Indians’ right to smoke peyote as part of their religious ceremonies. According to the American view established 200 years ago in the passage of the Bill of Rights, it doesn’t matter if 250 million Americans believe that what you have to say is wrong. It doesn’t matter if 535 members of Congress, nine members of the Supreme Court, and the president of the United States believe that the way you worship is incorrect. So long as your exercise of those rights of

worship and speech does not infringe upon anyone else’s or endanger the society that protects your rights, or interfere with some compelling state interest, you have the inalienable right to pray the way you want and to worship the way you want and to speak the way you want. That is what our democracy is all about. In the *Sherbert vs. Verner* case of 1963, the Supreme Court established a test that said that the only time you can restrict the First Amendment preferred rights (speech, religion, publication, petitioning the government) is when the state has a compelling state interest, when it has no other way of achieving that interest without limiting the right, and when it scopes a way of achieving its goal in a manner that will have the minimum impact possible on the exercise of that right.

Two weeks ago, the Supreme Court of the United States threw

that rule out. It overturned, in effect, the *Sherburn* decision (although it didn’t say so explicitly). In analyzing the opinion, it is clear that there are only four members of the Supreme Court now who believe in the compelling state interest test. The other five now hold that any state interest, compelling or not, so long as it is neutral and doesn’t single out religious groups for restrictions, can be used to limit the First Amendment’s right of free exercise of religion. If you want to have an exemption for your religious behavior under this analysis, you must go to the political process, to the state legislator. But, it was precisely to ensure the protection of fundamental rights against majoritarian tyranny that the Bill of Rights was passed 200 years ago. If we have any common agenda as Christians and Jews, it is to arise now and insist that this attack on the fundamental institutions



**Rabbi David N. Saperstein answers a question from the audience.**

of democracy in America is simply unacceptable.

Furthermore, we have seen a picking away at the establishment clause by recent Supreme Court decisions. While there is still a five-person majority that holds to the traditional application of the establishment clause in separating of church and state, one of those five, Sandra Day O'Connor (who is today the most interesting justice on the Supreme Court – the swing vote on most of these issues), says in effect, "Yes, there can be separation of church and state; we shouldn't have religious symbols on public property, but surround the religious symbols with reindeer, Christmas trees, Santa Claus, Christmas lights and it loses its religious significance; it becomes a secular symbol of America." Thus she joins the other four conservatives in limiting the application of the establishment clause.

Tragically, most religious groups were silent or applauded that. I have to tell you, as a Jew, I am offended by the Supreme Court of the United States having the arrogance to tell me when my religious symbol of a menorah can be stripped of its religious significance. As Christians, I would suggest to you the notion of the Supreme Court of the United States, by a five-four vote, decreeing as a matter of constitutional dogma that the depiction of the birth of the Son of the God in which you believe can be stripped of religious significance, should be horrifying to all devout Christians in this country. We have a common agenda in restoring the constitutional fabric of separation of church and state. This should provide one of the major political agendas that we, as religious people, have to address.

This does not mean that we will always agree on all issues. You know the one issue domestically in the United States where there is the greatest disagreement is the question of abortion. There are those who argue that the statute in *Webster* was an invidious attack on the free exercise of religion. You had a broad coalition of Protestants and Jews and even some Catholics joining together to prevent the Supreme Court from overturning *Roe vs. Wade*, arguing that the Catholic effort to oppose abortion was no less than an effort to impose their religious views on America.

I am deeply and passionately committed to the fundamental right of choice of every woman to determine what to do with her body, but I am about to take a radical view on the question of the attack on the Catholic Church from most pro-choicers. I believe the critique is simply wrong. The Catholic Church's assertion that life begins at conception, that a fetus is a human being, that American law ought to protect that human being, is no different than my assertion that the Jewish tradition mandates that the U.S. have policies that take care of the poor, that respect human rights, that take care of the environment. The belief that God has entrusted the environment to us, but the earth still remains "the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Psalm 24:1), is as much a theological view as is the Catholic view on abortion. The church has every right to make that argument in the courts and the legislatures of the land and to try to convince the majority of the American

people. I believe they will fail and I believe the argument I hold is stronger, but I am not afraid to debate it in the free marketplace of ideas and prevail there.

What is inappropriate, albeit not unconstitutional or illegal, is when anyone tries to impose religious authority on the political decisions of their members, be they elected officials or voters. Democracy depends on the free exercise of conscience of every individual citizen, and when any religious group says: "Regardless of what you personally believe, I am telling you that as an observant Jew, Protestant or Catholic, you must vote this way," then I believe that is stepping over a line and undermines what free choice and democracy is all about. In this context, it is perfectly appropriate for Catholic cardinals and bishops to say that a Catholic or any human being should not vote for, or support, candidates who do not respect the human rights of fetuses. It is another thing for Cardinal Humberto Medeiros to send out a pastoral letter saying it is a "sin" for any Catholic to vote for such a candidate. It is another thing for a Catholic to threaten to excommunicate people who act differently. These represent efforts to impose religious authority on political behavior. Let them appeal to the conscience of people, but (as the formal position of the Catholic Bishops Conference has always maintained until now) let people walk into the voting booth and vote their conscience without fear of any religious penalty. And whether it is the Lubavitcher Rebbe in Williamsburg or bishops in southern California, that is the position we must take.

We live at an unprecedented moment in human history, one where we need to bring our religious values to bear on issues. We live in an age where technology has altered the very nature of political debate, posing moral and political questions for which there are no precedents. The problems we face are not new but the solutions we choose will reshape the world, for better or for worse, in ways our ancestors could never have understood. It is precisely technology that makes this the first generation of human history that doesn't have the luxury to make mistakes and to learn from them. We have always had warfare, but not the kind of warfare that could plunge a world into a nuclear holocaust. We have always had pollution, but not the kind that could make our water undrinkable and our air unbreathable, that is destroying our ozone layer and threatens to permanently alter the climate of the earth. We have always had intrusions into our liberties and privacy, but not when matched with the technology that could make Orwell's nightmare of Big Brother the reality of the world. We have always had economic and political injustice, but not when matched with the capability of ideologues and have-nots everywhere in the world to use terrorism (perhaps soon, even nuclear terrorism) to destabilize any civilized society. We have always had the challenge of how to ethically apply new technologies, but not when matched with the capability of creating new forms of life through genetic engineering and perhaps, within our lifetime, alter human life itself.

This is an extraordinary time in which we live. As Father Bryan Hehir has pointed out, in a world where it is



technologically *possible* to do almost anything, what we *should* do becomes the paramount question. And when it comes to such moral debate, we religious people have a special role to play and a special message to bring. We must not remain silent at this moment in human history when such decisions are being made. We, of all people, have an obligation to speak out; that is what it is to be a religious person in our society; that is our responsibility. We are, Christians and Jews, mandated to be a goad to the conscience of America – religious people, proud of our heritage, bearers of the flames of justice and weavers of dreams of freedom. That is our task and that is our goal. May we be worthy of the trust placed in us.

### **Mrs. Joseph**

Well, I think you certainly heard two very interesting presentations – two that had much in common. Certainly a conviction that religion's role in the world is to help us to be peaceful, to care for one another, and I suspect that there are many issues, particularly in the social and economic field, where Jews and Christians are working together and agree and, indeed, I believe that Rabbi Saperstein even mentioned some of them. It is also very clear that there are issues where there is disagreement, real and serious disagreement, and maybe we should talk a little bit more about those, quietly, calmly. One of the judges with whom many Minnesotans are familiar, Donald Lay, who is the chief judge of the Eighth United States Circuit Court of Appeals, said not long ago, "Unfortunately, we are breaking down a bit the barrier between church and state." Rabbi Saperstein, you mentioned one recent incident of a Supreme Court ruling. I wonder if the two of you would talk a little bit about what Judge Lay apparently feels is some breakdown in the barrier between church and state, and I would like to ask you also if there isn't perhaps much less emphasis today on the whole issue of separation of church and state. When you have a president of the United States saying that he supports a constitutional amendment to allow prayer in the schools, that support is coming from a very high leadership position. Would you comment on this, please?

### **Father Drinan**

I think that there has been a regrettable decline over the last 10 or 15 years and that I have come to accept the idea that in fairness to everybody there should not be denominational sectarian prayers in the public schools. I don't think it's appropriate to have them there. The Republicans changed their platform in 1980. For the first time they came out for an amendment to bring God back into the schools, as they said. That has not passed the House or the Senate, and I do not think that we should have a constitutional amendment in that area.

### **Rabbi Saperstein**

The good news is that, on the whole, in the state legislatures the pro-separationist argument has continued to prevail, that efforts to impose school prayer on public school

children in the Congress of the United States have failed over and over again. Efforts to require the teaching of scientific creationism have failed over and over again. There was, of course, the question of the equal access bill that will soon be decided by the Supreme Court. Originally the Religious Right failed in this effort, i.e., they originally tried to pass a special provision to allow religious groups in schools. That failed, too. It was only when they formulated their ideas in the guise of a civil liberties provision so that you could not discriminate *against* religion if you allow any extracurricular activities that they were able to get that bill through the Congress of the United States.

On the whole, then, the Religious Right has lost on all its efforts, even with the support of the president of the United States. They have lost in all their legislative attempts to change the notion of separation of church and state. The vast majority of people when asked, "Do you want prayers in the school?" will say, "Sure." But when you ask in a Baptist community, "So that means a Catholic kid will get up and lead your kid in prayer." "No, no that's not what I'm talking about." Or if you say in a Catholic community that a Baptist kid is going to lead prayer, or to any of them that it means that a secular humanist kid is going to get up and lead prayer in front of them, then hardly any of them like the idea. There is no way around this dilemma. Congress found that out. It couldn't pass a constitutional amendment that would allow for prayer in school and still protect the religious liberty of students.

What is alarming is the Supreme Court. There is still a five-person majority for the traditional interpretation of the Establishment Clause, although Sandra Day O'Connor has indicated that she does not like the traditional three-part test as to when to apply it. But she is still holding to a general separationist interpretation. Of course, of that five are the three liberal justices, Marshall, Brennan and Blackman, who are over 82 years of age, each having a bout with very serious bad health. The court may very well be changing. And don't forget that Ronald Reagan and George Bush together have already appointed over 60 percent of all sitting federal judges in the United States. These are the younger judges who will reshape the federal court for the next generation. It is the implications of that trend, in this area and other areas of our fundamental rights, I find really alarming.

### **Mrs. Joseph**

But you know that there are many other ways in which this whole issue of separation of church and state comes into our society. For example, currently, everyone is concerned with child care, or at least many people are concerned with child care. Certainly a lot of working women are concerned with that issue. The House of Representatives recently passed a child care bill that does allow federally funded vouchers to pay for sectarian child care. Now, is that a divisive issue?

### **Father Drinan**

The vote on that was 2-to-1. Some of the finest liberals

voted for that proposition and especially in view of the fact that some 30 percent or 40 percent of all child care is done in church-related institutions and that, later on, if this does in fact become finalized, I think regulations could be construed to the effect that they cannot indoctrinate the children and can't have religious symbols, and that, I think, could work out. The need is desperate, and the church-related entities are very prominent in this area. Congressman Don Edwards, my friend, voted for and Congressman Barry Frank voted no. So I don't think there's a clear liberal line as to what is the most appropriate thing in this unique area.

**Mrs. Joseph**

I think Rabbi Saperstein voted "no." Didn't you?

**Rabbi Saperstein**

Yes. We did end up opposing the bill. I think this was the most anguishing decision liberals had to make in the last decade on legislation. The bill was the "ABC Bill," which would put over \$2 billion into the child-care system, and originally allowed for federal money to go to church- and synagogue-run child-care programs so long as they were non-denominational and did not teach religious doctrine. If they ran a secular program they could get the money. Some of the civil libertarians like the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, opposed even that, opposed any money going to churches. But the vast majority of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish groups all said that is an appropriate compromise. At the last minute, that limitation was lifted from the Senate bill. Senate Democratic leadership thought it needed extra votes to get it through and lifted these restrictions. And then in the House, the Edwards version that had the same kind of limitation also lost. So all of the Protestant and Jewish groups and all of the liberal groups and liberal members of Congress were stuck with a decision: do you let the biggest, most important, most pressing child-care bill in two decades go down the tubes over the church-state issue? Or do you vote it through with the bad church-state provisions and go to court and try to fight it? Most of the Jewish and Protestant groups painfully could not afford to legitimize such a huge hole being torn through the First Amendment and decided they were going to oppose the bill, try to kill it and hope for a compromise next year, even though we knew how many children around America would be hurt by that. Many other liberal groups and many liberal members of Congress said "no, we can't let our best chance to get important legislation that will make such a difference for millions of kids go down the tubes over this issue. We will fight it out in court later and take our chances." That is what the decision was about, and it was a most anguishing one. The fact that both the House and Senate bills had no real church-state protection does indicate a certain kind of erosion. This would not have happened a decade ago.

**Mrs. Joseph**

Another issue. It seems to me – I don't know if the

members of the audience will agree with me – but I was rather struck by the optimism, about how well we're all getting along together in this country. Yet, as you know, there is new legislation on the books to try and do a census on hate crimes, and the reason for it is the number of hate crimes that have erupted in this country over the last few years. Would either of you care to comment on this?

**Father Drinan**

Well, I was very pleased that the president signed that the other day and that the Justice Department will carry it out vigorously, I hope, and I think we should know who are doing crimes of hate against gays, or other people, or against blacks, or Jews. I had trouble, originally, when they said that we are going to segregate crimes by this, but I think that might give us some very, very helpful statistics. I must say that I am embarrassed, I am ashamed of some universities where they have hate crimes or hate signs against blacks or Jews, and I think this law is a good thing. It is new in America that we do have such a law. We have had the Ku Klux Klan, and I think this is an extension of the principle that they were outlawed and that the crimes of hatred that they were propagating were made punishable.

**Mrs. Joseph**

It certainly does suggest that we are not all the way home, that there is still a lot of room, a lot of need for good hard efforts between the Jewish and Christian communities on some of these problems. I wanted to ask also about the recent Senate resolution in regard to Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, which has aroused a good deal of controversy. How do you now see this playing out in this dialogue between Jews and Christians?

**Rabbi Saperstein**

Fascinating question. Again, the political context is that overwhelmingly the Congress of the United States, as are most Americans, is supportive of Israel. Statistics are very interesting on this. Remember the common wisdom about Ronald Reagan, that he was the "Teflon president?" He implemented policies rejected by the overwhelming number of Americans, yet it never affected his overall popularity. Israel, in this past decade particularly, has engaged in some policies that clearly are morally problematic to Jews and non-Jews alike and, yet, despite those policies being repudiated by the overwhelming number of people, the popularity of Israel as a country is at an all-time high in the United States. It is astonishing and encouraging. I think it's due, at least for the over-35 generation, to what I call the "Exodus syndrome." When Americans think of Israel, they do not think of Shamir, we do not think of Likud, Menachim Begin; we think of Paul Newman in Exodus. We think of David Ben Gurion and Golda Meir. We think of an Israel in which America profoundly believes – a determined democracy, struggling to survive against all odds; we think of the Israel described as eloquently as it has ever been described in Bob Drinan's book *Honor the Promise*.

What happened with the Jerusalem resolution was exceedingly bad timing. Whether we should have seen it in retrospect is hard to say. When President Bush began to talk about having qualms whether Jerusalem was supposed to be the capital of Israel, the pro-Israel community said, "We must make a statement about this. We have overwhelming support in America, overwhelming support on the Hill; we need somehow to remind the president of that." Then Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan went ahead and introduced this particular resolution without consultation with the key Jewish groups. We were forced to decide either to support it or let it die. We decided we had to support it once it was out there. And then we got hit by the circumstances of the hostage release and then this terrible situation of St. John's Hospice in Jerusalem, which should be equally abhorrent, I would hope, to all people here, tarnishing the image of the Israel in which the Congress believes. For a while, this left a bad taste in people's mouths. Senators and congressmen who are Israel's best friends on the Hill told me that they heard more bitter comments from friends in the House and the Senate about Israel and what is happening these last weeks than ever before.

Will it just be a passing phase? Hopefully, yes. Whenever there has been a downturn in support for Israel, it has rebounded to all-time high levels. But that depends on Israel maintaining the moral high ground. And I think that's where we as Christians and Jews who are friends of Israel have a common endeavor to remind Israel that support in the United States does not rest on the pro-Israel community's political effectiveness and PACs, it rests in the fact that the American people believe in Israel, in the rightness and justness of Israel, and Israel must always reflect that reality in its moral behavior and policies as well.

#### **Mrs. Joseph**

Father Drinan, since you let Rabbi Saperstein go on at some length on that answer, I would like to ask you one. You mentioned something about the fact that the Vatican is now recognizing a number of countries, particularly a number of Third World countries, and I believe you said you hoped that at some point it would also recognize Israel. I think the pope's non-recognition of Israel is one of the very sore points – it is a hurt, I believe, in the Jewish community. There is no understanding of why this should be so, and added to the fact that the pope has very warmly greeted Mr. Arafat and Mr. Waldheim, would you tell us please why you think this is the position of the pope?

#### **Father Drinan**

Well, I don't know about the pope, but I know that I have talked at the highest level with ambassadors and Vatican diplomats and they really sincerely feel that the Holy See is following a principle. They have not given recognition to Jordan and they say, "We will want to give recognition to these nations as soon as they finalize the borders." They have a long, civilized tradition saying, "We are not going to have a diplomat

who goes to Odenese and to other nations. We will give recognition when the whole thing is finalized." They have consistently followed that and they say, "Well, we can't make an exception for Israel because then all these other nations would involve us in politics." Clearly, you see behind this they are thinking of their relations with the Arab nations, and in fairness to the Holy See they have some very serious problems in the Arab nations. Some of these nations have expelled Christians. In Malaysia, for example, where I was last year on a human rights mission, I'm not certain they're going to expel the Christians, but I went there because 22 Christians were put in jail, including Brother Rogers, who was working for the Catholic Social Justice Agency there. The Moslems feel very, very hostile, in a way, to Catholics and Protestants, and I suppose the Holy See says that, "If we inflame them more by recognizing Israel, we will jeopardize the interest of Christians throughout the Arab nations."

#### **Mrs. Joseph**

Thank you both for responding to my questions and making this a most interesting evening. ■



*Rabbi Max A. Shapiro, director of the Center for Jewish-Christian Learning, left, and Monsignor Terrence J. Murphy, president of the University of St. Thomas, welcome, from center to right, Mrs. Geri Joseph, Rabbi David N. Saperstein and Father Robert F. Drinan, S.J.*

# What Jews Can Learn From Christian Spirituality

DR. CAROL OCHS

## 1991 Lecture Series

UNIVERSITY OF  
St. Thomas



CENTER FOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN LEARNING

# What Jews Can Learn From Christian Spirituality



Dr. Carol Ochs

Carol Ochs, Ph.D., is a philosophy professor at Simmons College in Boston, Mass., and served as chair of that department from 1970 to 1988. She earned her doctorate in philosophy from Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass., and has taught at City College of New York. A prolific writer, she has published numerous articles and reviews as well as three books, the most recent being *An Ascent to Joy: Transforming Deadness of Spirit* (1986) and *Women and Spirituality* (1983). Her fourth book, *The Noah Paradox*, will be published in spring 1991. Her awards include fellowships at the Danforth Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, where in the summer of 1988 she researched *The Symbol of the Journey in Medieval Spirituality*.

“Who is wise? One who learns from all people” (Pirke Avoth 4:1). We can learn from all people. Jews can learn from Christians, and Christians can learn from Jews. All people of faith who are concerned with spirituality are seeking fresh ways to express the essential truths that will bring us closer to reality. But though we may all share the same quest, we are not the same. We recognize and celebrate our diversity while affirming the deeper commonality of our spiritual goal. We seek neither conversion nor a smoothing down of differences, because life manifests itself in difference. So our goal is neither union nor plurality but maximum diversity integrated into a rich harmony.

Judaism is my native language, my home, but I recognize the intimate nature of other languages and the strong call of other people's homes. My own spiritual way has been irrevocably stamped by the qualities of my native language and the atmosphere of my home, but I have become acquainted with other languages and felt welcome in other homes. These sojourns have deepened my appreciation of our diverse and wondrous lives.

Let us begin by defining spirituality as “coming into relationship with reality.” Entering into this relationship intensifies our sense of aliveness. Spirituality enlivens us, in part by connecting our separate stories to a larger story that lifts up the individual parts and gives them meaning. It does so by expanding our memory and engaging us in the future, which is where we will find our energy and source of joy. It also opens us more to the present and to the gift of attention.

Spirituality helps us realize our truest identity; it sustains us as we let go of the dualisms that we allow to define us, it leads us to value our memories, it goads us to growth and creativity, and it frees us from the fear of death.

Because spirituality is so personal, we may forget that it is also socially and culturally constructed. Just as the eye cannot see our own souls, so we look to others to learn which aspects of their lives correspond to aspects of our own. In studying another tradition we sometimes find aspects that do not correspond to anything within our own background. We are puzzled by the gaping silences in our own religious tradition and so we attempt to learn another's language. Why, we ask,

since the human condition is essentially universal, has our own tradition chosen not to speak about these experiences?

We will examine four important religious concepts about which the Jewish tradition is silent. These four great silences are spirituality itself, prayer, our relationship to God, and God's nature. Unlike the Christian tradition, Judaism does not equate spirituality with mysticism. Jewish mysticism, which Jews do talk about, refers not to a set of shared experiences but to a specific cosmological system and a series of practices and interpretations. But while Jews may be deeply spiritual and deeply concerned about spirituality, this concern does not manifest itself through explicit writings and discussion, as it does among many Christians. Jews are also silent about prayer. Jews do indeed pray. There are prescribed prayers for daily morning, afternoon and evening services, prayers upon awakening and before retiring to sleep, blessings over food, grace after meals, and blessings and prayers for numerous occasions. Jews study the prayers, they even understand study itself as a form of prayer, but they do not discuss prayer and, more significantly, they do not discuss their experiences in prayer.

In considering people's relationship to or with God, the image of the journey, which is so central to Christian self-understanding, plays almost no role in Jewish self-understanding; rather, Jews describe their relationship with God as a covenant, akin to that of a marriage. While considered significant for Jews, the covenant image remains little talked about. Jews feel perhaps most uncomfortable talking about God. The reluctance to talk about God may derive from a prohibition against making graven images of God; the scrupulous may feel that God-talk necessarily leads to imperfect images. But the silence is large and pervasive.

One concept, the *presence of God*, does enter into 20th century Jewish discourse in the form of discussions concerning the absence of God or the hiddenness of God during the Holocaust. A belief in absence or hiddenness presupposes a commitment to presence. The anguish bespeaks great faith. And just as the concept of God's absence grows out of a prior commitment to presence, the silence surrounding God, spirituality, prayer, and our relationship to reality evinces an



earlier richness possessed by these terms. I will examine these areas of silence, try to understand the reasons for the silence, and show my indebtedness to the Christian spiritual tradition, which helped make the areas of silence within my own tradition apparent to me. Certain Christian spiritual teachings have opened me up to new experiences and sent me back to my own tradition to search out teachings that I may have overlooked and that Jews have generally neglected. In this way the Christian spiritual tradition has enriched my own faith.

If we understand the Jewish discomfort with the term "spirituality," we can better understand what Jews can learn from Christian spirituality. Spirituality, in its popular usage, focuses on inner states, solitary experiences, and personal journeys. For Jews, love is always enacted love, that is, love is expressed through actions, commitments, and ways of being in this world. Of course, love may be accompanied by a quickened heartbeat and a heightened sense of meaning, but just as the burning bush is not itself the presence of God but merely a sign that God is present, so ecstatic states, visions, locutions, levitation, and the like are not essential to spirituality but are merely signs that accompany the spiritual way. Spirituality for Jews is an enacted relationship to God; it is a transformation of the self for the sake of reality. All the disciplines and practices that form part of a spiritual commitment are undertaken not for the experiences that may follow or to perfect the self, but rather for the sake of the community, that is, for others. Our most appropriate response in the face of life is gratitude. Like gratitude, spirituality is not something we feel so much as something we do, even when doing is a kind of not doing, opening ourselves to be transformed.

While Jews and Christians share much in their understanding of reality, they tend to weigh some of their insights differently. Christians talk about community, about all Christians being part of the body of Christ – and place some importance on the whole – but their writings on spirituality emphasize the individual's experiences in coming into relationship with reality. Individual faults are assessed, individual trials are faced, and individual salvation is implicitly promised. In contrast, Judaism's major prayers are written in the plural, even the confession of sins recited on the Day of Atonement: "*we* have sinned" and

"*we* are responsible for one another." Judaism regards the most fundamental religious unit to be that of the *people*, whose extension is both historical – over time – and spatial – across many lands. The people, constituted of individuals, ranks above the individual in importance. The language of prayer is not the language of the individual soul yearning for God but that of a people yearning for its creator. The individual may yearn for God, but that yearning replicates the people's relationship to God. God established a covenant with the entire people, and only through that initial covenant does any covenantal relationship become accessible to each individual. Judaism holds that we are not sufficient for ourselves. This insufficiency is apparent in the very language of faith. All the fundamental categories that are essential to our relationship

with God – covenant, prayer, the sacred – were first formulated in terms of the entire community and thus made accessible to us individually. Even now, certain prayers cannot be offered without a community of 10 adults.

Jews believe further that not only are we not sufficient for ourselves, we were also not created for ourselves. We are not here for the sake of ourselves but for creation as a whole to fulfill the particular role we play in creation as a part of the Jewish people. The Jewish concept of spirituality, then, has been subsumed under a larger concern for the Jewish community. In the past, this communal religious response has served to carry

those of lesser faith: their unbelief has been absorbed in the context of a strong community commitment. But the intense family, neighborhood and community structure has broken down in our times. What was once built into the structures of our lives, imbibed in the very air we breathed, must now be consciously, and often individually, acquired. Individuals, once understood primarily for their role in the community, must now be understood in their lonely search for God.

Jews have a second difficulty with the notion of spirituality. If spirituality is to bring us into relationship with reality, it must distinguish sharply between appearance and reality. The distinction within the Christian spiritual tradition has often taken the form of disparaging this world in favor of a more real world. This is, to be sure, not the final Christian position: Jesus, in fact, teaches that the kingdom of Heaven is within us;



***Dr. Carol Ochs shares her reflections on how Jews can learn from Christian spirituality.***



nevertheless, the otherworldliness that has attached itself to some Christian spiritual writings makes Jews uncomfortable. Jews, like Christians, are anxious to distinguish appearance from reality. They look for a dimension of depth underlying all they experience, but they never do so with two worlds in mind. Lying at the heart of the Jewish vision is the statement, "And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good" (Genesis 1:31). To be sure, Jews have experienced enough suffering and horror to know that the world, as it currently stands, is not "very good," but goodness lies within the nature of creation, and the spiritual life seeks to actualize the potential for goodness in this world.

The Jewish spiritual way, then, largely follows the prophetic way, encompassing political concerns and social justice. But because the prophetic way occurs late along the spiritual way, so reading about it is not helpful for beginners. Those embarking on a lifelong commitment to the spiritual way will not find all their steps outlined in a spirituality that is equated with prophecy. Reading the life stories of those spiritual teachers who preceded us can encourage us to undertake our own commitment, to take in stride our setbacks and confusions, and to embrace the whole of the spiritual way. Little in Jewish religious literature compares to the autobiography of Teresa of Avila, or to Richard Rolle's *Fire of Love*. These texts illuminate not only the achieved prophetic voice but also the stammerings of the beginner and the meanderings along the way. Jewish reticence about writing religious autobiographies is due, in part, to modesty; even those mystic texts we have are largely pseudonymous, because all veneration is thought to belong to God. In light of this reticence, we can be grateful to those who have chronicled their own unsteady spiritual way.

A second area of silence in Jewish spirituality is prayer. Jews learn when to pray and what prayers to recite. They even recognize study as a form of prayer. But they do not talk about types of prayer or about the experiences one might encounter in prayer.

Christians recognize six forms of prayer. Four of these are petition, or bringing one's concerns to God; intercession, or seeing beyond one's immediate personal needs to the needs of others or the requirements of the whole community; confession, or recognizing one's own limitations; and thanksgiving. All these forms of prayer occur as part of the Jewish daily prayer service. The other two forms of Christian prayer, meditation and contemplation, are encountered in the Jewish tradition only on occasion. Meditation entails focusing one's attention on a single line of text or on a single narrative. Contemplation is transcending all the busyness of petition, intercession, confession, and thanksgiving, and simply resting in open awareness of God's presence. It is believed to be a grace, not an activity that can be planned. In most forms of prayer we conduct a dialogue with God; in contemplation we quietly experience God's response. This response is neither verbal nor visual, but a felt presence: "O taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:9). The very fact that we can find a

quotation in the book of Psalms that exemplifies contemplative prayer suggests that the Jewish tradition recognizes this form of prayer even while it has largely fallen into disuse. The book of Psalms, which makes up a significant part of the formal Jewish worship service, can also be studied as a manual of prayer. It illustrates moments of illumination along with moments of great anguish and spiritual aridity, and it draws out the tension between personal desires and national concerns. The reappropriation by Jews of the book of Psalms as a manual of prayer may be seen as a gift from the Christian spiritual tradition.

Christians discuss not only the various forms of prayer but the nature of prayer life. Arid prayer is usually considered superior to – if less pleasurable than – prayer with consolation, providing a sense of fervor and focus. Beginners at prayer are said to be rewarded by God and thus reinforced in their prayer life; those who are advanced no longer seek God's rewards, they seek God.

The Desert Fathers, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and other early Christian spiritual teachers all warn against focusing too intently on what we experience in prayer. They stress the importance of constancy, not of extraordinary experiences. Jews, in fact, teach the same lesson, and they have learned it so well that they would not think to ask one another, "How is your prayer life?"

The prayer life of Jews is significant, though it is not easily separated out from their daily life. It consists not only of the regular morning, afternoon and evening services, but of those moments of awareness brought forth by the blessings Jews utter when they wash their hands, eat bread, drink wine, put on new clothes, see a scholar, even hear thunder or see lightning. They pray, and the prayer book contains some of the deepest insights and most valuable teachings of the faith, but praying is not set apart from other activities. Jews' reticence about discussing prayer life may, in fact, grow out of a deep love, one that makes them embarrassed to speak of something so intimate. But their children, thinking perhaps that their parents' silence merely betrays indifference, may turn to religions whose traditions emphasize the experiential aspect of faith. They look outside Judaism because they cannot find the ecstasy within their own tradition. It is there, but Jews have not made the riches of their own faith experience clear to the next generation. Experiences in prayer are intimate. But just as we can overcome embarrassment in discussing intimate health matters with our physicians, so can we learn to discuss prayer matters with our children. Drawing upon the vocabulary of the Desert Fathers or John of the Cross, Jews could show to the next generation the transformations in their own prayer life that indicate a deepening of their relationship to God.

A central concept in Jewish spirituality is the notion of study as worship. But this study should not be confined to the Talmud or even to the week's Torah portion; it should also examine the spiritual transformation of our ancestors. We must reclaim our own Scriptures, seeing through them the shape of a life lived in relationship to God. We can begin to do so by

reading what Christian spiritual teachers have discovered in the text. For example, a difficult question to ponder is why those in the Hebrew Scriptures who were called God's servants were singled out for that title. Just what do those people have in common? There are, in fact, only four: Abraham, Moses, Job and Isaiah's suffering servant, who is unnamed. But it remains difficult to come up with a common characteristic that is not also shared by Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Joshua and many others. Jews can sometimes find help with a textual problem by reading what a Christian spiritual teacher has written about it. Julian of Norwich, for example, offers two ideas that apply directly to the problem of defining "God's servant": (1) "All our Lord does is right, and what he permits is worthwhile. These two definitions embrace both good and evil, for all that is good is done by our Lord, and all that is evil is permitted by him"; and (2) "Sin is hell." If sin is hell, then virtue is heaven; from that we can deduce that religion operates not with a carrot or a stick but with love freely given. Satan questions that principle in the prologue to the book of Job: Can people really love God for God's sake and not for the sake of receiving God's blessings? Yes, in the case of the four, Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son despite God's promise that his offspring would be as numerous as the sands of the shore; Moses loves God even as he is denied entry to the promised land and must foretell the falling away of the Jewish people after his death; Job declares his understanding of God even after suffering the death of his children, the loss of his property, and the leprosy of his skin; and Isaiah's servant willingly bears the punishment due to the world's guilty.

The third "great silence" in Jewish tradition concerns our relationship with God. Martin Buber points out, in his *"I and Thou,"* that our relationship with God underlies all our true relationships with one another. When we can relate to others for what they are in themselves rather than for what they mean to us, or as Buber puts it, as an I to a thou, then the eternal Thou underlies the relationship. It has been said that someone who claims to love God but hates his own brother is a liar. I would modify that to "someone who claims to love God but hates his brother is a beginner." In pursuing the spiritual life we are all beginners. We may gain a tremendous insight only to discover that we had experienced that insight five years earlier but were not yet in a position to hold on to it. Like all relationships, the spiritual life, which is lived in relationship with God, has its ups and downs: moments both of intimacy and of estrangement, of rapport and of misunderstanding. Our relationship with God is modeled on our spousal and family

relationships, which it also transforms. Our love for a brother, a neighbor, or a stranger within our gate grows over a lifetime lived in relationship with God. But paradoxically, our relationship with God is found in and through all our human commitments; we don't love God and our neighbor, we love God in and through our love for our neighbor.

Jews can learn to nurture their spiritual lives by looking to the lives of certain Christian mystics as models for developing a healthy spirituality. While not sharing in the notion of a "communion of saints," Jews can learn from earlier adherents of the Christian faith. Often the autobiographies of Christian spiritual teachers, even more than their explicit manuals of instruction, can serve as road maps for all those wandering in the uncharted lands of the spiritual way.

Christian writers have also developed a schematic to represent the spiritual way. While most people pursue more tangible goals, those on the spiritual quest seek changes that are mainly internal and often find themselves in need of some guideposts, or standards, to help them chart their uncertain course. In the Christian tradition, spiritual goals have often been set in the framework of a journey model. The spiritual journey includes well-defined landmarks, pitfalls and resting places along its way. The journey model serves to reassure and strengthen those who seek the intangible goals offered by the spiritual life.

The traditional spiritual journey follows a linear pattern that comprises five major stages: awakening, purgation, illumination, dark night of the soul, and union. In the traditional view, a person on the spiritual way progresses from one stage to the next and never looks back. In our own lives, however, we find that we awaken, only to fall back to sleep, and

then to awaken several more times before we are fully awake. We also find that illumination, while wonderful, may be but momentary; it comes and it goes, and we eagerly await its return. Biographies of the spiritually enlightened often tell of the subject's intense devotion, insights, and seemingly unshakable faith. Yet in other, perhaps more honest, biographies and in many autobiographies we read that after a time of intense nearness to God, the subject may squabble with those who are closest or feel deeply morose about an inability to correct certain faults. Thus the literal concept of the journey cannot usually be applied directly to our actual spiritual life. Despite this limitation, the journey symbol has won an enduring place among the techniques used for self-understanding, because it portrays the self as a process unfolding over time; at heart, it symbolizes transformation



**Dr. Carol Ochs, left, and Dr. John C. Merkle listen intently to a question from the audience.**

rather than static identity. Most significantly, it gives us a language through which we can express our concerns and share with those near to us the nature of our commitment.

Jews have also developed a model for a life lived with God, but it is not the journey (although paradoxically their Exodus from Egypt probably served as a basis for subsequent journey images). The model for the Jewish spiritual life is marriage, both in the commitments we make and in the way we live our daily lives. We get up in the morning, go about our business, and perhaps, during the course of the day, we may recall that we are loved. For an instant we experience a quiet joy, but then we return to our tasks. At the end of the day we sit down to eat and perhaps experience the food as a gift, though more often we probably do not notice it. As we lie in bed, we may feel joy in resting, or we may just fall asleep. Our covenant with God is present throughout our lives, nourishing and supporting us at every moment. Yet though it is the single most significant aspect of our lives, we are often unconscious of it. From time to time we become aware of it, and with this consciousness come moments of quiet joy and a deep sense of gratitude. From time to time, as in any long marriage, there are disagreements, moments of hurt, even tears. But the trust and faithfulness are stronger than the grief. The grief will be healed, and the love will persist. A Buddhist description of an enlightened person is one who "chops wood and carries water." The tasks of life do not suddenly disappear just because God loves us. In fact, we experience God's love by performing those daily tasks and routines. The very ordinariness of the Jewish model is a profound strength. But it also makes the spiritual way difficult to transmit to another generation or even to assure ourselves that anything is happening, that this life lived in a Godward fashion is really about something. Here the Christian journey model becomes an important gift to the Jewish spiritual tradition. It reminds us of the stages through which we will pass and repass; it reminds us that there are times of aridity and dullness as well as moments of heightened awareness and insight.

This brings us to the fourth silence in Judaism: God. There are excellent reasons to eschew God-talk. God is often invoked irresponsibly, aligning God with some partisan political view; entering into any such discourse would approach blasphemy. But once we recognize the dangers, isn't there a cautious, correct, and reverent way to talk about God? Buber remarks that we shouldn't talk *about* God, we should talk *to* God. His view reflects normative Judaism, which has eschewed all theology. But talking about God can help us grow closer to God. God-talk, engaged in carefully as a means to clarify changes in our relationship to God, can greatly help those on their spiritual way. Teresa of Avila talks about God's "courteous majesty." While her manner of expression may be dated, her point is timeless: God does not force, or coerce, but waits courteously, with infinite patience, to be invited into our life. Buber writes similarly that God may be found in this world "wherever people let him in" (*Tales of the Hasidim*). Such remarks help those who are trying to deepen their own

spirituality understand how much depends on their openness and willingness. When Julian of Norwich writes about God as mother, we are struck by the timelessness of her insight, reached centuries before there was an explicit feminist consciousness. Living in deliberate relationship to God, she realized that God comes to us in the forms and images of our deepest needs. Hildegard of Bingen, in experiencing God's love for all being and the interconnectedness of all being, could have been writing from within the contemporary ecology movement, but in fact, she wrote out of a consciousness sensitized by an ongoing relationship with God. God-talk that grows out of a lived relationship rather than a theoretical construct is less likely to be faddish, narrowly partisan, or distorted. Finally, all God-talk reverts to silence, but it is a silence shaped by a lifetime of experience. Meister Eckhart invites us into this depth of silence in writing about the God above God, or the desert of the Godhead, i.e., the God we experience rather than conceptualize. There was a time when Jews wrote about God, and the Psalms remind us of that time. Finding the God of the Psalms, written about in the ongoing discourse of the Christian tradition and expressed in the many linguistic and metaphoric styles of the past 2,000 years, can renew the Jewish tradition of talking about God.

Two statements from John Meagher's *The Truing of Christianity* summarize the gift Christian spirituality can bestow on Judaism in the area of discourse about God. In asserting "My faith is in God, the giver of all that is true," Meagher recognizes God as the Creator of reality, but also recognizes the truth found in different religious traditions. The second statement is "I honor all those who have shown me the pathways of God." Jews can learn from many who have come before them – from their explicit teachings and from their godly lives. They can look not only to Jewish writers but can expand their world to include the Desert Fathers, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, John Meagher, and many other writers who have shown pathways to God. They can look also to individuals who have shown ways to God through their being, and through them recognize their own sense of wholeness.

I remarked that spirituality opens us to richer life by connecting our separate stories to a larger story that lifts up the individual parts and gives them meaning. It does so by expanding our memory and engaging us in the future, which is where we will find our energy and source of joy. Our relationship with God mirrors God's relationship with the characters in the scriptures. Examining our two traditions shows the very different ways in which Jews and Christians make use of the same scriptures, but underlying the differences is an awareness that the larger story is God's story and we are all caught up in it.

The Christian spiritual tradition has made me aware of the areas of silence within my own tradition: spirituality, prayer, relationship to God, and the nature of God. In the process I have encountered models that enrich my own faith. We are, after all, on the same quest. "We ... is not counterpoised by

they: it is everyone, without exception. We are in pursuit of God. We should collude in examining how to do it well"

(Meagher, p. 210). So, as I quoted at the outset, "Who is wise? One who learns from all people." ■



*An audience of 500 Jews and Christians attended the fall 1990 program on spirituality.*



*Rabbi Max A. Shapiro, left, Monsignor Terrence J. Murphy, second from left, and Dr. Arthur E. Zannoni, right, welcome Dr. Carol Ochs, center, and Dr. John C. Merkle.*



# The Challenge of Jewish Spirituality to Christian Faith

DR. JOHN C. MERKLE

## 1991 Lecture Series

UNIVERSITY OF  
St. Thomas



CENTER FOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN LEARNING

# The Challenge of Jewish Spirituality to Christian Faith



Dr. John C. Merkle

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Crossing over into Judaism is something very old within Christianity, and yet it is also something utterly new. For 2,000 years Christians have been crossing over, drinking from the wellsprings of biblical Judaism by, for example, recounting ancient Hebrew narratives and praying the Psalms. Yet, in this traditional Christian crossing over there was merely an appropriating of things Jewish without an accompanying appreciation of their essential Jewishness; their significance was thought to consist only in relation to the Christ they were perceived to anticipate. And the imagined Christ of this perceived anticipation bore little resemblance to the Jesus that contemporary historians assure us was Jewish in all his ways – especially in his spirituality; moreover, there was virtually no crossing over into post-biblical Judaism; rather, in the traditional Christian perspective, there was the assumption that post-biblical Judaism was something obsolete and spiritually dead.

But now there is a new kind of crossing over that we Christians are experiencing. We are discovering the fact that the Hebrew Bible has a spiritual radiance that was not usually perceived by Christians in the past, that it has an abiding significance not conveyed by designating it an “Old Testament,” and that it contains a vision and a promise that is as yet unfulfilled; furthermore, we are discovering the spiritual riches of post-biblical Judaism and learning to enrich our own spiritual lives by allowing that tradition to inspire us and to challenge many of our previously unexamined assumptions.

In this essay I will present a few of my ideas that are a part of what I propose as a reconstruction of Christian faith and a renewal of Christian spirituality in light of the new Christian-Jewish encounter. I will proceed by reflecting on aspects of the Jewish understanding of God and of Torah and the way of living by Torah, on how these usually have been misrepresented in Christian theological literature, and on how a better understanding of these force us to re-examine our Christian understanding of God and Christ and to reshape our Christian spirituality.



However diverse the Jewish interpretations of God might be, they are expressions of belief in the one God of Israel, who

is also believed to be the Creator and Redeemer of the world. So Jewish monotheism is not simply a matter of believing in one God, it is an expression of faith in the only true God, the Lord of the universe, who transcends the world while being present to it. As such, it is an alternative not only to polytheism but also to henotheism, pantheism and any other type of theism one can imagine.

One of the ways by which Christian theologians have attempted to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity to Judaism has been to advocate the idea that the Christian view of God is superior to the Jewish view. It has often been claimed, for example, that Judaism teaches a God of wrath, Christianity a God of love. To be sure, some of the deeds attributed to God in the Hebrew Bible appear, from the Christian perspective at its best, to be less than godly. But such a contrast is obviously unfair. Not only does it fail to acknowledge the fact that in the Jewish Bible God is repeatedly referred to as loving and compassionate but it also ignores the fact that Jewish views of God have developed well beyond those found in ancient Israelite religion. Post-biblical Jewish understandings of God, no less than developed Christian views, call into question some of the Bible's accounts of God's action. The late Rabbi Abraham Heschel, perhaps the foremost Jewish theologian of the 20th century, claimed that “in the name of God's mercy, we have the right to challenge the harsh statements of the prophets.” But if we criticize biblical “passages which seem to be incompatible with our certainty of the compassion of God,” Heschel reminds us that “the standards by which those passages are criticized are impressed upon us by the Bible, which is the main factor in ennobling our conscience and endowing us with the sensitivity that rebels against all cruelty.”<sup>1</sup>

When we read the sages of Israel – whether ancient, medieval or modern – we discover that what Jews understand about God's love and compassion is every bit as profound as what Christian theologians have usually claimed could be known only through faith in Christ. While believing that Jesus is the incarnation of God's Word, we Christians must acknowledge also that Jesus was an identifiably Jewish man of God; indeed, when we compare what Judaism teaches about



God to what we have learned from the gospel of Christ, we discover that Jesus had a thoroughly Jewish understanding of God and a thoroughly Jewish way of relating to God. The fact that we believe Jesus' relationship to God was uniquely intimate should not lead us to think that he thereby stood apart from the Jewish faith, but rather that he embodied it in a way par excellence.

Jesus addressed God as "Father" and taught his followers to do the same; so we Christians, who have come to know God by way of Jesus, have followed his example and taken his advice when speaking to (and of) God. The Christian church was formed in response to God's Word dwelling in Jesus, God's Word spoken by this faithful son of the covenant who, as such, and in a way par excellence, was Son of God; so we Christians speak of Jesus as God's incarnate Word, as God's Son. This same church, which began in the bosom of Israel on Pentecost, eventually was fashioned into a Gentile church when God's spirit was "poured out" on Gentiles, inspiring them to respond to God in Jesus' name; so we Christians speak to (and of) God by the power of the Spirit, as in the name of the Son. Given these foundations of our faith, these roots of our church, we Christians have traditionally expressed our monotheism in trinitarian terms, speaking of the one God as "Father, Son and Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup>

The Jewish people knew God as Father long before Jesus of Nazareth preached his gospel. They listened in faith to God's Word in Torah and the prophets centuries before that Word moved the prophet from Nazareth. And long before the church spoke of God as Spirit the Jewish people knew of God's presence as Spirit, cleansing and fortifying the human spirit, empowering the people Israel to live by their covenant with God. All this the Jewish people knew from of old, and to this very day still know. But what they have always emphasized is the oneness (unity) of God who relates to them in a variety of creative and redemptive ways.

We Christians are true to the Jewish faith of Jesus, as also to our own Christian tradition when, along with the Jews, we stress the oneness of God. But this does not preclude our speaking of God as triune: "Father, Son and Holy Spirit." We know that there is but one God and that God possesses inner unity. But, again, given the way we Christians have come to

know God, we have learned to speak of God's inner unity in terms of trinity. Sometimes the way we have articulated this has sounded more like tritheism (belief in three gods) than trinitarianism, but this is not what our tradition at its best has promoted. And the risk of such a heresy is lessened when we Christians renew and deepen our ties with the Jewish people and learn to value what they have to tell us about God.

Valuing the Jewish emphasis on the oneness or unity of God, and thereby steering clear of the heresy of tritheism, is bound to have a profound effect on Christian spirituality. Several years ago I read a report based on a survey that had to do with the prayer life of American Catholics. The report claimed that American Catholics more frequently directed their prayers to Jesus than to God the Father. (In fact, the report claimed that American Catholics prayed even more frequently to Mary, the mother of Jesus, than to her Son.) While praying to Jesus (or even to Mary) should not be considered a spiritual aberration, we Catholics – and indeed all Christians – would do well to recall that Jesus himself taught us to pray to the One he called Father. The norm, then, should be that we Christians pray to God, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is understandable that we who have come to know of God through Christ would so love and revere Christ that we would pray not only to the One to whom he taught us to pray but to him as well. But we must be careful not to

replace God-centered prayer with Christ-centered devotion. Recognizing and appreciating the fact that Jews pray to God without invoking a mediator can help us recall that, even for those of us who invoke the name of Jesus in our prayer, our worship is to be directed ultimately to the One to whom Jesus taught us to pray.

This, of course, forces the question of how we are to think of Jesus as the incarnation of God. I will make a suggestion about that in connection with what I have to say about the Torah, but before turning to that question I would like to suggest one other way that our understanding of God may be enhanced by our "crossing over" into Judaism.

Within the Jewish tradition there is the conviction on the part of many sages that God is intimately affected by our deeds and our plight, affected even to the point of suffering. Rabbi Heschel went so far as to say that the idea of divine pathos is



***Dr. Carol Ochs and Dr. John C. Merkle reflect while a question is raised from the audience.***

"the central idea in prophetic theology," because "God's participation in human history finds its deepest expression in the fact that God can actually suffer."<sup>3</sup>

The anguish of God echoes throughout the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature. By way of example we may recall Second Isaiah's allusion to God as "a woman in travail" (Is. 42:14) and Third Isaiah's claim that "in all their affliction [God] was afflicted" (Is. 63:9). In Jeremiah (13:17) we read of God saying: "But if you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive." This theme of God's weeping recurs throughout rabbinic literature where, for example, we read of God weeping over the failings of creatures (Hagiga 5b), over the destruction of the temple (Pesikta Rabbati 29: 2), and over the tragedies that have befallen Israel (Seder Eliyahu Rabba 17). In one account (Lamentations Rabbah 1:45ff) a series of historical tragedies is enumerated and after each tragedy is cited the poignant verse from Lamentations (1:16) is repeated: "For these things I weep."<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, since God's ways are not our ways, God's weeping is not the same as our weeping. When the biblical and rabbinic authors speak of God weeping and suffering, they are aware of the fact that they are speaking indicatively and analogously, not descriptively as if rendering a picture of the way God really is and acts. Their use of anthropomorphic words about God does not indicate an anthropomorphic understanding of God, but it does indicate their conviction that there is an analogy between Creator and creature. The belief that God and human beings have certain characteristics or experiences in common is not the same as the anthropomorphic belief that God is endowed with human attributes. Both God and human beings may express the virtue of love, for example, but God does so divinely and humans do so humanly. So God suffers only as God can suffer, and we human beings suffer as only we can suffer.

Many Christians may think this talk of God's suffering is nothing new, that, after all, as Christians we focus on the suffering of Christ whom we believe is God incarnate. But, in fact, classical Christian theology, having assimilated the Aristotelian idea of suffering as an imperfection unworthy of God, refutes the idea that God suffers. The traditional view is that Christ suffers in his human nature, not in his divine nature. So despite the doctrine of the incarnation, from the perspective of classical Christian theology, God can seem so remote that it feels more appropriate to pray to Christ or to Mary or to other saints than it does to God. To be sure, there are Christian theologians nowadays who do speak of the suffering of God, claiming that for God to be unmoved by the deeds and plight of creatures would indicate not perfection but deficiency on God's part. And, indeed, there have been Jewish thinkers, at least since the time of Maimonides, who have tried to explain away the biblical and rabbinic allusions to God's suffering because they, too, bought into Aristotelian metaphysics. But the idea of God's suffering can be found in abundance within the Jewish tradition. And even if we reject the classical Christian

theological view that God cannot suffer, it is good for us Christians to realize that others, without any doctrine of incarnation, affirm the suffering of God – a suffering born of compassion.

Learning from Jews that God suffers with us – rather than our focusing solely on how Christ suffers for us – can have a profound effect on our own understanding of God and thus on our way of relating to God. It can help us overcome our tendency to blame God for the evils that befall us, and it can save us enormous spiritual energy that might otherwise be spent in the fruitless attempt to solve the insoluble problem of how God, thought to be not only all-good but also all-powerful, either causes or permits evils to occur. For if God suffers, then God is not all-powerful. According to Heschel, "the idea of divine omnipotence, holding God responsible for everything, expecting God to do the impossible, to defy human freedom, is a non-Jewish idea."<sup>5</sup> I suggest that the idea of divine omnipotence should become a non-Christian idea as well. If we stop thinking of omnipotence as an essential attribute of the divine, then we will be free to appreciate as never before that the true mark of divinity – what makes God divine and therefore worthy of our worship – is infinite compassion, unending love, not almighty control or endless power.

Such an understanding of God is bound to have a profound effect on our spirituality, our way of relating to God. If, with Heschel, we believe that "God's mercy is too great to permit the innocent to suffer," but that "there are forces that interfere with God's mercy, with God's power," we may be moved to have "compassion for God," which Heschel regarded as a component of faith in God;<sup>6</sup> moreover, we may become convinced that our supreme responsibility is to let the divine mercy flow through our lives so that we may thereby help God save the innocent who suffer.

If the divine is absent from our world, if our lives are still largely unredeemed, we must not blame God. God creates a world sublime, but we fail to appreciate it; the glory of God fills the earth, but we do our best to conceal it; God's will has been revealed to us, but we fail to heed it; God assaults our consciences with the demand for justice and love, but we ignore the outcry. Accusing God for being absent, as if we have been present, blaming God for the ills that plague us, as if we have been laboring to redeem the world, is not the way. No, what is meaningful is to put an end to evil by becoming vehicles of God's redeeming presence.

This theological perspective, I suggest, undermines the attempt to indict God for human failures, human atrocities, or to accept as inevitable the reality of evil. It also undermines the naive belief that all things will necessarily turn out for the best, and it challenges us to do our part to help make this happen by "consecrating ourselves to the fulfillment of God's dream of salvation."<sup>7</sup> This, in the end, is the true measure of Jewish and Christian spirituality.



At this point, perhaps it is in order for me to share my

definition of spirituality. Speaking generally, I regard authentic spirituality as the way we human beings, regardless of our specific religious affiliations, strive to live in accord with the ultimate source of our being and meaning. In a specifically Jewish context, I see spirituality as striving to live in accord with God, by way of Torah, within the covenant community of Israel. In a specifically Christian context, I see spirituality as striving to live in accord with God, by way of Christ, within the church community.



Now I shall turn to a consideration of the Torah and the way of living by Torah, to how Christian theologians usually have misrepresented these, and to how a better understanding of Torah and its way forces us to rethink our understanding of Christ and our Christian spirituality.

In the strictest sense of the term, Torah designates the first five books of the Bible. More broadly, it refers to the Jewish Scriptures as a whole, and even to the entire corpus of authoritative Jewish writings. Torah is often thought of by Christians exclusively in terms of law. Yet, only a small portion of the Torah deals with legal matters; most of it is comprised of narratives about God's involvement with humanity, particularly with the Jewish people. To live by way of Torah is "to walk in God's ways" (Deut. 10:12), which includes observing commandments of the Torah. Many traditional Jews believe that the biblical Torah in its entirety is the inspired Word of God. Others, like Rabbi Heschel, claim that although not every line of the Torah is divinely inspired, the Torah contains the Word of God. In both cases, traditional Jews believe that the Torah is a sign of God's love and, as such, charts a course by which human beings may live in a way that is compatible with divine love.

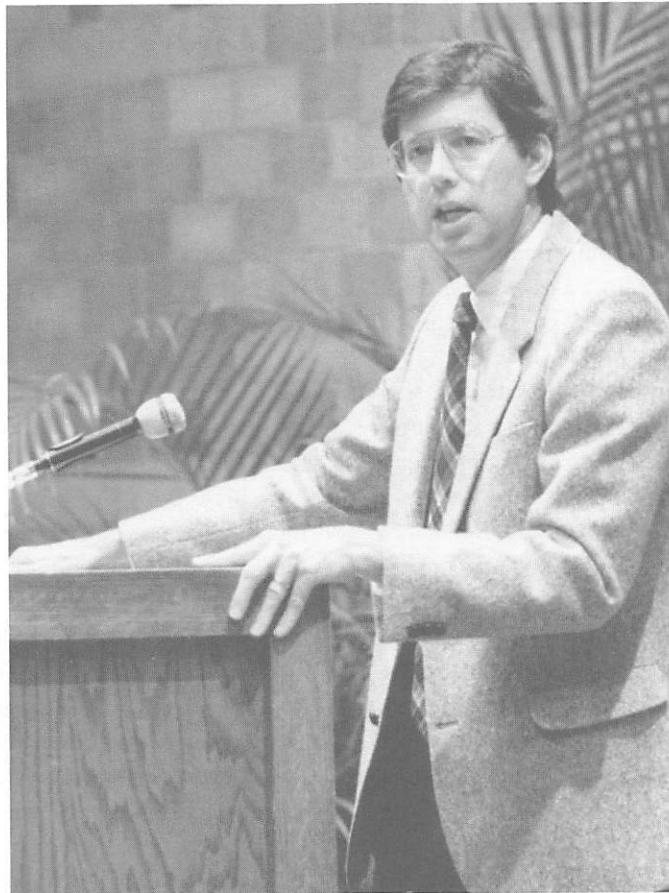
There is every reason to believe that Jesus himself was a Torah-observant Jew, even if, like other Jewish teachers, he disputed certain standard interpretations of specific laws of the Torah. Yet, since the first century, Christians have preached the gospel of Christ as liberation from the Jewish Torah. Adherence to Torah has been repeatedly portrayed in Christian polemics as legalism, in contrast to faith. Jesus and his gospel have been continually played off against Judaism and its Torah in an attempt to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity. It even

became a standard Christian claim that those who still observed the Torah did so because they rejected grace. Such an idea cannot survive a genuine encounter with Judaism and its understanding of Torah. According to traditional Jewish teaching, Torah is God's gracious gift to Israel and the world. So much for the Christian polemic that contrasts grace and Torah! Again, according to Jewish teaching, the law of Torah is primarily the law of love, and love for God and God's creatures is the purpose of living by way of Torah. So much for the antithesis between Torah legalism and gospel love! To read the Jewish sages is to feel the power of the Torah's challenge and the holiness of its ways.

This new-found Christian appreciation for Torah must inevitably affect the way we think of Jesus as the incarnation of God. Now that we affirm the Torah as God's abiding Word, we who believe that Jesus is the incarnate Word of God must think of him not in opposition to Torah but as its embodiment. Since God is one, God's Word in Christ to Christians could not be contrary to God's Word in Torah to Jews. So just as Jews do not maintain that Torah is the only way of serving God, we Christians will not claim that faith in Jesus is the only valid way of responding to God.

In the name of the one God who transcends all finite realities, Judaism protests the absolutizing of anything finite. It does, nonetheless, recognize particular finite manifestations of the one absolute God. In this sense it is an incarnational faith – without positing an incarnation in the Christian sense. Like Judaism, Christianity affirms the reality of a transcendent absolute. By its doctrine of the Incarnation, the

church does not – or should not – intend to absolutize a particular manifestation of God, but to keep alive the memory of that divine manifestation on which Christianity is based. If the Incarnation is understood as a particular instance of divine involvement in human history – even as the supreme instance – then this understanding is not contrary to the monotheism of Jesus and Judaism. But if the doctrine of the Incarnation is understood to mean that Jesus must be considered the only way to God, then Christian monotheism is attenuated or undermined. This is because God alone, and not even an incarnation of God, is absolute. It is worse to absolutize something which is not a manifestation of God than to



***Dr. John C. Merkle shares his reflections on what Christians can learn from Jewish spirituality.***

absolutize that which is; but God transcends divine manifestations – even a divine incarnation. If we Christians hold such a view we can make theological room for Judaism and other faiths as valid pathways to God.

While we Christians should acknowledge that God alone is absolute, we must also affirm the abiding significance of God's incarnation in Christ, by which we have come to know God. And since the Torah is God's Word, we will also affirm its abiding significance. If we who have faith in Christ cherish also the faith of Jesus, we will be grateful that Jews continue to live by way of Torah rather than abandon it for Christianity. And this will not diminish our gratitude for having been granted the opportunity to live in covenant with God through faith in Christ – a way distinct from but not unrelated to the way of Torah. To be sure, the way of Jesus was the way of Torah. But, paradoxically, what God has wrought through Jesus – by inspiring Gentiles to heed the gospel preached in His name – is a way for Gentiles to know, love and serve God distinct from the way of Torah.

Grateful as we may be that we have been given our own Gentile way to respond to God distinct from the way of Torah, we Christians would do well to allow our spirituality to be challenged and affected by the way of Torah. I will give three examples of how “crossing over” to the way of Torah can be spiritually enriching for Christians.

In the first place, the way of Torah is a communal way of living in accord with God. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber is perhaps best remembered for his urging us to relate to each other and to God in a deeply personal way, as an I to a Thou (rather than in an impersonal I-It manner). But Rabbi Heschel reminded us that “our relationship to God is not as an I to a Thou, but as a We to a Thou.”<sup>8</sup> Heschel was well aware of the fact that there is no true communal response to God apart from deeply personal individual response. Concerning prayer, for example, he said that “it is in the heart of every individual that prayer takes place.” But he also stressed the fact that “a Jew never worships as an isolated individual but as a part of the community of Israel.”<sup>9</sup> What is true of prayer is true of each mitzvah commanded by the Torah; each is done “in the name of all Israel,” and many of the most important mitzvot are enacted in a communal way, particularly in a family setting.

To be a Christian is also to be a part of a community, the church. But there has always been a stronger tendency toward individualism in Christian spirituality than there has been in Jewish piety. This is evident in what is often a Christian preoccupation with personal salvation as contrasted with the Jewish concern for the redemption of the people Israel and, indeed, of the entire world. There is simply a much stronger sense of peoplehood among Jews than there is among Christians. Perhaps this is because the peoplehood of Israel is expressed primarily in the very concrete setting of family life, while membership in the church is often understood in terms of being a part of the “mystical body of Christ” or the “communion of saints.”

Many Christians also enact their spirituality in a family

setting. But the Torah gives the Jewish family an official status as a religious community that does not have a parallel in church law. In Judaism the family – every bit as much as the synagogue – is recognized as a context for essential liturgical or ritual practice. In Christianity, home rituals are mere optional pious practices, not given any official liturgical status by church law. If the family is really to be “the domestic church” that the Second Vatican Council suggested it is, then church law should mandate family liturgical life in ways analogous to the Torah.<sup>10</sup> And if Christian spirituality is to become as communal as the way of Torah, we Christians must celebrate our faith in family contexts at least as much as we do in church buildings – regardless of whether church authorities ever grant family celebrations an official ecclesiastical status. At any rate, to overcome the tendency toward individualism in Christian piety, and to develop a healthy balance between the individual and communal, we Christians would do well to observe how observant Jews live by way of Torah.

A second example of how Christians can be spiritually inspired by the way of Torah has to do with the fact that the way of Torah is a very physical way of rendering life holy. It is enacted in concrete deeds of justice and compassion, just as the redemption it signifies and fosters is a concrete redemption of this world. Torah is enacted also in concrete ritual observances such as affixing a *mezuzah* to the doorpost of a home, touching it tenderly and kissing the hand that touched it. Torah also has a lot to do with food – abstaining from some foods, koshering others, and pronouncing just the right blessing over just this type of food. Judaism is known in something as mundane as the baking and braiding of challah on Fridays, in the smell of that baking challah filling the home, and in the very enjoyment of eating it. One of the more important lessons we Christians can learn from Jews is how the gratification of our carnal needs can be an act of sanctification.

Of course, Catholicism and other forms of Christianity have their carnal, earthy side as well – as is evident, for example, in sacramental celebrations. But whereas the celebration of the sacred significance of the physical is deeply engrained in Jewish piety, it often seems to go against the grain of Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality is often a form of otherworldly spiritualism that betrays an ambivalence toward – or even at times a downright hatred for – God's good earth and the things thereof. The renowned Thomas à Kempis taught generations of Christians to strive for “perfect contempt of the world,” for it was his conviction that “the soul that loves God despises all things that are less than God.”<sup>11</sup> To be sure, there are more ecological forms of Christian spirituality than the one espoused by Thomas à Kempis. But spiritualism – the bifurcation of the spiritual and the physical and the elevation of the spiritual at the expense of the physical – has been far more of a problem in Christianity than in Judaism. So we Christians would do well to learn from Jews just how much matter matters – how very much it matters for a healthy spiritual life!

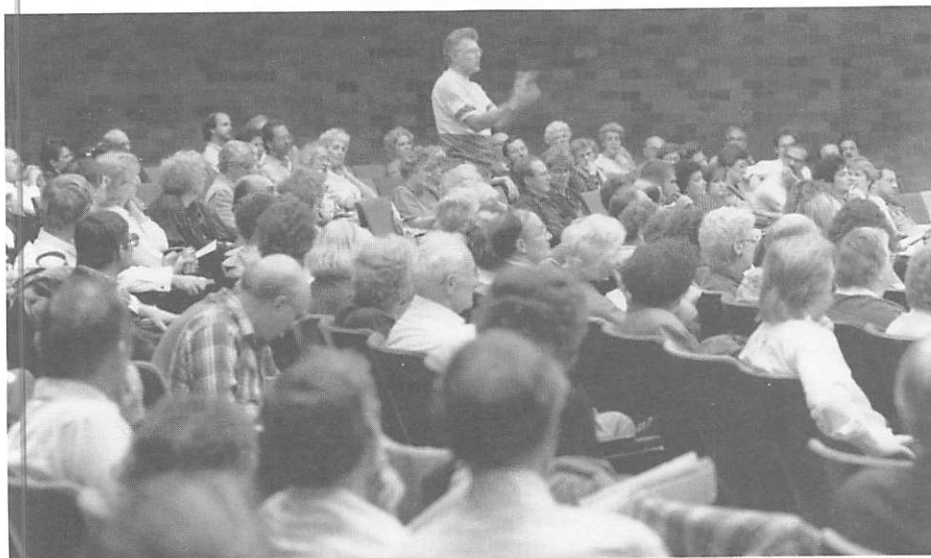
My final example has to do with the fact that the way of Torah is also a way of sanctifying time, of welcoming the



eternal into time – particularly in the form of the Sabbath. Christian spirituality, despite its liturgical calendar, is too often a way of trying to escape from time for some make-believe realm of the timeless. There is often expressed in Christian spirituality a heaven-bent eagerness to be done with this temporal life. This proclivity was expressed perhaps most poignantly by the most influential saint of modern times, Thérèse of Lisieux, when she wrote of how from childhood she “dreamt of martyrdom” and of how her heart would leap when she imagined “the unheard tortures Christians will suffer in the reign of the anti-Christ.”<sup>12</sup> Thérèse, like Thomas à Kempis, may represent an aberrant Christian spirituality, but she, like he, has been one of the most influential spiritual guides in the history of Christianity. To enrich our appreciation of time as a blessing – and to overcome any tendency to regard it as a curse – we Christians would do well to turn to spiritual guides who live by way of Torah. And we would do well to celebrate time in ways analogous to the Jewish celebration of time. We would be especially wise to emulate how Torah-observant Jews celebrate the Sabbath. If there is anything we and our threatened environment desperately need in this fast-paced, secularized, polluted world, where exhaustion, loneliness and alienation abound, it is Sabbath rest, Sabbath prayer, Sabbath togetherness, Shabbat shalom!

## NOTES

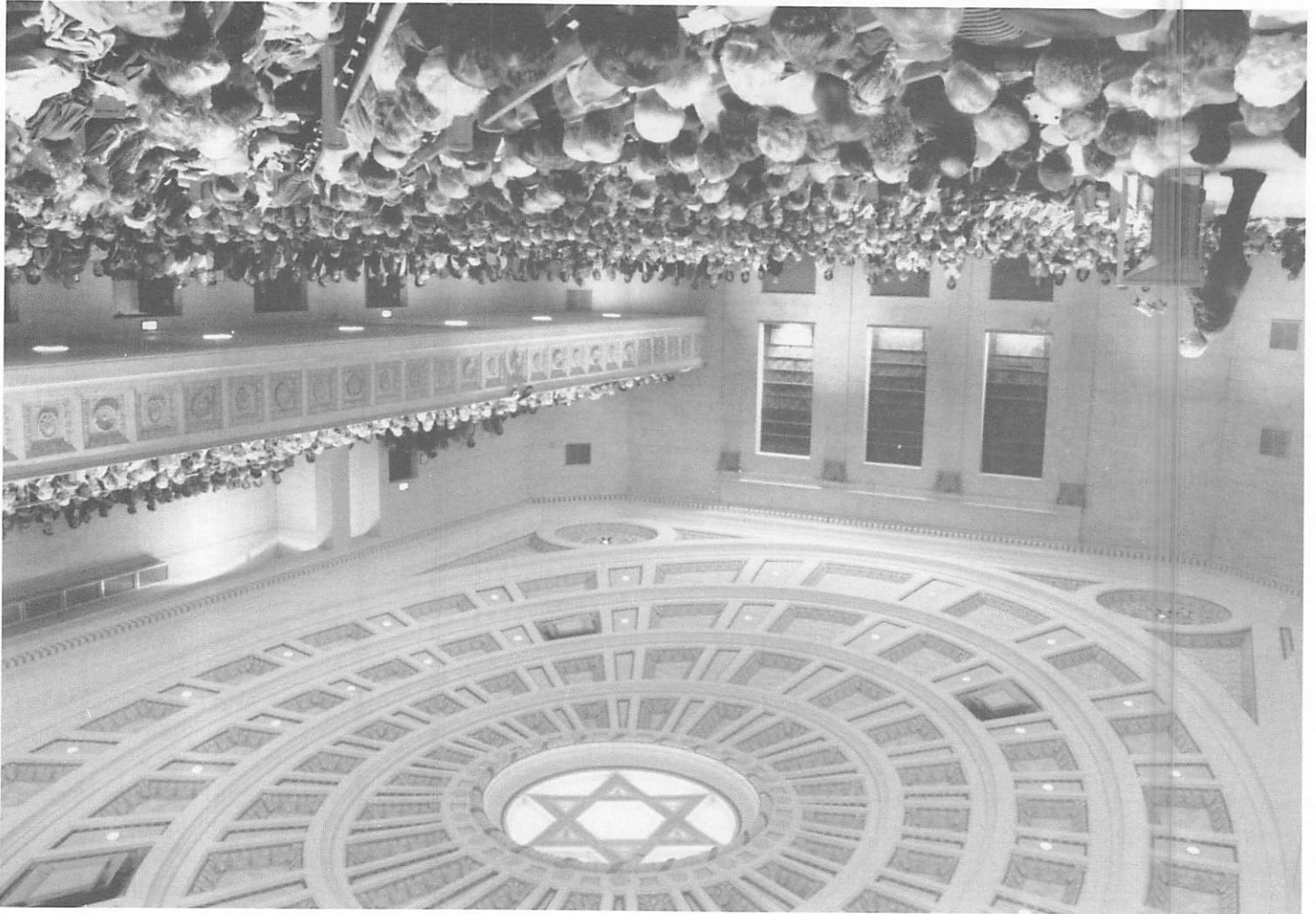
- 1 *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1955), p. 268.
- 2 Cf. Paul van Buren's chapter on the triune God in *A Theology of Jewish-Christian Reality, Part 1: Discerning the Way* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 68-93. Van Buren's three-volume work on “the Jewish-Christian reality” has inspired much of my own reflection on the relationship of the church to the Jewish people and my own rethinking of Christian teachings vis-à-vis Judaism. The two volumes other than the one just cited are: *A Christian Theology of the People Israel* (1983) and *Christ in Context* (1988), both also published by Harper & Row. See also van Buren's provocative papers, “Twenty Years of Christian-Jewish Dialogue: A Protestant Perspective” and “The Challenge of Christian-Jewish Dialogue: A Protestant Perspective” in *Proceedings of the Center for Jewish-Christian Learning: Inaugural Lecture Series*, College of St. Thomas, 1986.
- 3 “Teaching Jewish Theology,” *The Synagogue School* 28 (Fall 1969), p. 12; *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 259.
- 4 For these references, as well as an insightful reflection on the suffering of God, cf. David J. Wolpe, *The Healer of Shattered Hearts: A Jewish View of God* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1990), pp. 147-151.
- 5 “Teaching Jewish Theology,” p. 13.
- 6 “On Prayer,” *Conservative Judaism* 25 (Fall 1970), p. 4; *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), p. 301.
- 7 *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), p. 151.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 10 Cf. Eugene Fisher, “Creation, Family, and the People of God: What Catholics Can Learn from Jews,” *Religion and Intellectual Life* IV (Spring 1987), pp. 130-131.
- 11 *On the Imitation of Christ*, trans. by Abbott Justin McCann (New York: New American Library, Mentor Religious Classic, 1957), pp. 45 and 58.
- 12 *The Story of a Soul*, trans. by John Beevers (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1957), p. 154. ■



*A member of the audience expresses a concern about crossing over in Jewish and Christian spirituality.*



*A standing-room-only audience filled the sanctuary of Temple Israel in Minneapolis, Minn., to hear Rabbi Harold S. Kushner. The sanctuary held more than 1,200 and an additional 1,300 were seated elsewhere in the building.*



# Who Needs God?

RABBI HAROLD S. KUSHNER

*A Beverly M. and Sidney R. Cohen Lecture*

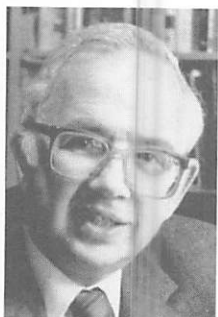
## 1991 Lecture Series

UNIVERSITY OF  
St. Thomas



CENTER FOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN LEARNING

# Who Needs God?



**Rabbi Harold S. Kushner**

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner is the rabbi of Temple Israel, Natick, Mass., a position he has held since 1966. A Conservative rabbi, he is best known as the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, a best seller on the subject of dealing with tragedy, which has been translated into 10 languages and was a Book of the Month Club selection. He also wrote *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, another best seller, which was awarded the Christopher Medal for contributing to the exaltation of the human spirit, and *When Children Ask About God*. His newest book, *Who Needs God*, was published in October 1989.

Kushner is a native of Brooklyn, N.Y., and a graduate of Columbia University in New York and of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where he was ordained a rabbi in 1960. He also has a doctoral degree in Bible from the same seminary and four honorary doctorates. Kushner has studied at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the Harvard Divinity School. He has taught at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., and at the Rabbinical School of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

Rabbi Kushner's books have been praised as "touching, heartwarming, provocative and comforting." Whether or not the reader is religious, Kushner's writings have a profound effect. He speaks with authority and wisdom, and his talks are enlightening and inspirational.

I was realizing earlier that this is the fourth or fifth consecutive year that I have found myself in your community in October or November. Having come here every year I have learned some things. I have learned, for example, that wherever I happen to be speaking I am not to say that it's good to be in Minneapolis or it's good to be in St. Paul; it is always proper to refer to the Twin Cities, because some people get very upset if I mention one and not the other. But what I have learned more significantly, is that the ecumenical interfaith effort that is going on in the Minneapolis-St. Paul community is the envy of this entire nation.

I don't know if you appreciate it because you live here and you've gotten used to it. Nobody else does the things that you are doing here. In no other community is the program as deeply rooted, as widely received, as imaginative, and nowhere else does it operate at the same high intellectual and spiritual level as the programs in which you are involved. Year after year my invitation to come to the Twin Cities would be under the auspices of one organization or another that was doing pioneering work in Jewish-Christian dialogue. I think there are many reasons for this. It is the nature of your community, it is the nature of your environment, but I suspect the one advantage you have here in Minneapolis-St. Paul, which nobody else in America has, is the two people who are responsible for the Center for Jewish-Christian Learning, Monsignor Terrence J. Murphy and Rabbi Max A. Shapiro.

The inspiration for this evening's talk came out of a Sabbath service at which I was officiating many years ago. I was a young rabbi at the time. I had just recently come to my congregation in Massachusetts, and in my youth and naiveté I thought that I still measured my effectiveness as a rabbi by counting the attendance at a Sabbath morning service. The more people who came, the better rabbi I was. I have since

learned the opposite, that the secret of success in the rabbinate is to keep the speech the same and find a new audience every week. But in those days long ago I didn't understand that yet. And this was a typical Sabbath service at Temple Israel of Natick, Massachusetts. It was attended by approximately 300 worshipers, most of them disguised as empty seats. I was disappointed. I was frustrated, and walking home from synagogue I took advantage of one of my good loyal congregants and poured out my frustrations on him. I said, "What's the matter with these people? I work so hard on my sermons and nobody comes to hear them. The choir is so good; the service is so nice; why don't these people come out in greater numbers?" He said something to me that I've never forgotten. He said, "You know, Rabbi, I'm a businessman. If people don't buy what I'm selling, I don't spend a lot of energy talking about how dumb my customers are. I assume that either I am selling something they don't need or I'm selling something they need and I haven't been able to persuade them they need it." When we talk about the human soul's need for God, when we tell people that their lives will be enriched if they will open themselves up to the faith commitment, when we say to them that just as we have physical needs for vitamins and minerals and food and rest, we have spiritual needs, and if those needs aren't met we will feel unfulfilled and out of sorts, what is it that we are selling? What is it we are really offering people and telling them they need and they can get from us?

My thesis is that in contemporary society people have become so sophisticated, so modern, so intellectual that they simply don't have room for the faith commitment, for the commitment to God and the religious community anymore, and they don't realize what they have given up when they have learned to live this way. Somebody asked me, "Who did you have in mind when you wrote your new book, *Who Needs God*? Who did you write it for?" I said that I wrote it for Phil

Donahue. Because, you see, for me he represents the good, decent, caring, morally committed individual who for one reason or another has only scorn for organized religion and for theological affirmation. I wrote it not only for Phil Donahue but for the dozens of people I have met on less well-known television and radio shows. I wrote it for the people I would find myself sitting next to on an airplane on a three-hour trip, and you strike up a conversation and they say, "What do you do for a living?" Sometimes I'm tempted to say I work for the CIA, because I don't want to get into any theological discussions with them. I say I'm a writer and I tell them what I write, and then I hear this whole speech about how they cannot believe that an intelligent, college-educated person would take religion seriously today. Those are the people that I had in mind when I came up with the contents of my most recent book.

What is it that we are selling them? What is it that we are offering them and offering ourselves? The first ingredient, I think, is a word we really have to dust off and reclaim from ancient history, because you don't hear people using it anymore. The word is reverence. Reverence, the sense of being in the presence of a power so much greater than yourself that all of a sudden that encounter defines your place in the universe. What has happened in the 20th century is that human beings have become so good, so skilled, so accomplished that we think we can do everything and there is no room for that sense of a power greater than our own. I would remind you that in Scripture the biblical definition of idolatry, of idol worship, is not bowing down to statues. Give the ancients a little bit more credit than that! They understood the statue is not God, it is a symbol, a representation of God. Idol worship in the Bible is human beings worshipping the work of their own hands, worshipping the human as if it were the highest source of value and there is nothing greater, human beings saying, "We are the ultimate." The problem with idol worship is not simply that it offends God. The problem is that it cannot help us. We cannot lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps. The conclusion I have come to is that technology is the enemy of reverence. Technology drives out reverence, because technology is the worship of the man-made. I am not a *Ludditer*; I am not putting down technology. I am grateful for the jet plane that brought me to Minneapolis-St. Paul this afternoon. I am grateful for the computer that I use to edit my writings. I am grateful for the medical breakthroughs that have been put at the service of members of my family. I have nothing against technology. I have a lot against the worship of technology, because it is a way of worshipping ourselves. It is a form of idolatry. Technology drives out reverence because we get so stuck on ourselves we forget that there are limits to human power. Let me give you my favorite example of how this works. Many of you will remember that summer evening in 1969 when human beings walked on the moon for the first time. You recall, many of us stayed home to watch Neil Armstrong on television. Theaters were deserted; restaurants were empty; downtown streets were free of cars; everybody was home to see human

beings walk on the moon live. The first time everybody had to watch. The second time men walked on the moon, we didn't stay home. We said, "What time is it on? If I'm back, I'll tune it in; if not, I'll catch it on the news tomorrow." The third time astronauts walked on the moon, you may recall they had to play a game of simulated lunar golf – "Let's see how the golf ball carries on this low-gravity surface" – because otherwise the television networks were not going to carry it live. We'd seen it. "What's on the 'Today Show'? Men walking on the moon? I've seen it; what's on the other channel?"

Here was perhaps the greatest technological achievement in all of history. I still don't understand how they did it. To calculate precisely where the moon will be, to send a rocket with human beings in it a quarter of a million miles through space to land precisely on the right spot, to get the astronauts safely onto the lunar surface, equip them to breath in the lunar atmosphere, get them back to the mother ship and return them to earth safely, what an incredible achievement! And by the third or fourth time we saw it, we were bored with it, so they had to send first a senator and then a school teacher into space just to get people to notice. Why? Because ultimately technology cannot inspire. We got tired of looking at men land on the moon. But how often can you watch a sunset and not be bored with it? How long can you sit by the shore of a lake and look at the water – and you don't feel restless, you feel tranquil. Why is it that whenever we have a weekend, whenever we have a day off, we feel this impulse within us, which we can't understand, to get away from the man-made, to get away from the offices with their artificial light and heat and air conditioning – you can't even open the windows – to get away from these skywalks, which guarantee you can go for a week and never breath fresh air in Minneapolis-St. Paul? We need to get into the country, to go to the lakes, to go to the forest, we need to be some place away from the man-made environment, freed from technology and see the world that God made just to remind us that we are not the ultimate.

Last December a member of my synagogue asked me a question I had never been asked before. In the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah in December, when you light the candles in the menorah, are you permitted to say the blessing if you use electric light bulbs instead of candles? Nobody ever asked me that before, so I looked it up, and the answer is no, you're not. You can't say the prayer over a light bulb, only over a real flame. Why? Picture yourself looking at a candle. It is fascinating. You sit there looking at it. You are almost hypnotized by the flickering flame of the candle. You can sit there for minutes, for almost an hour, just concentrating on the flame of the candle. How long can you sit and look at a light bulb? Ultimately, we need to be reminded that human inventions, marvelous as they are, go to a certain point and stop and beyond that God takes over. That is not a put-down. To say that there are limits to human creativity is not a put-down; it is reassuring to discover that if there is a question that we can't answer it doesn't mean it's unanswerable. If there was a problem we can't solve, we don't have to despair because

there is a power beyond the limits of human power. We need to rediscover this sense of reverence, that there are limits to what human beings can do. This brings me to the second of the ingredients of the religious faith commitment. When you believe in God, it is the grounding for morality. To say, as our Jewish and Christian traditions alike say, that there is one God, is not a mathematical statement, it is a moral statement. To say that the Lord is one is not the census return from heaven. "We've taken a survey of how many divine beings live there and the total is one." To say that there is only one God means it is possible to talk in terms of right and wrong, of permitted and forbidden. If there are many gods, what one god forbids, another one favors. What one approves of, another one prohibits. Remember reading the Iliad and all these gods exist and the question is not what does God want of me? The question is which god is powerful enough that I should serve him and he or she will protect me. There is no issue of right and wrong. To affirm that there is a single God means you can talk in terms of what is right and what is wrong, what is the will of God. What we teach in the monotheistic Judeo-Christian tradition is that just as God has built in the law of gravity and laws of chemical reactions, he has built in laws of moral right and wrong just as firmly.

I have seen only one Clint Eastwood "Dirty Harry" movie in my life. I don't remember the name of it. But what I remember about that movie is that I have never responded to a movie the way I did to that one with as sharp a sense of divergence between my head and my gut. I'm sitting there at home alone, watching this movie on television. My head is saying to me, "Why are you wasting your time on this trash? This is cheap, manipulative junk; have you nothing better to do?" And my gut is saying, "Yeah, blow them away! Get out the Magnum and shoot them down. Don't let them get away with that." What I learned is not that Hollywood knows how to make movies that reach me emotionally; I knew that. What I learned is that there is in me and there is in everyone of us an instinctive sense of outrage in the face of injustice. Somebody once wrote, "I cannot define justice but I respond to injustice instinctively." We have the sense of outrage, of "don't let them get away with that!" I can't tell you how many people have come up to me in the last nine years, because they had read my book and said, "Rabbi Kushner, I've got a great idea for your next book. Why don't you write *When Good Things Happen To Bad People*, because that's what really gets me." Let me prove it to you. When you read stories in the newspaper about insider trading on Wall Street, I suspect your reaction is, "Oh, that's wrong; they broke the law; they ought to be punished; they should get what they have coming to them." Fairly cool, fairly calm. When you read stories about the abuse of children, when you read stories about the Central Park jogger case, when you read stories about that family in California who kept their little girl locked in the closet, your response is different, isn't it? It's not, "Oh, they broke the law." It's outrage; it's, "How could anybody do that! Punish them; throw them in prison; get rid of them; make them suffer the way they made her suffer." Who teaches

us to respond instinctively with this sense of outrage? Who teaches little children to know how to say, "That's not fair!" Not only when we do something to them but when we do something to somebody else. Where do we get this? Unless God has planted in us a sense of instinctive justice, a sense that some things are absolutely wrong. Bertrand Russell was perhaps the most articulate spokesman for atheism in the English language in the 20th century. Russell once wrote, "Philosophically I cannot accept the notion that there is a God who ordains right and wrong. But emotionally, I must concede that there has to be something wrong with torturing little children beside the fact that I don't like it." If you don't like it, don't torture. I like it, I'll torture them. How can you say I'm wrong? In my congregation in Massachusetts, I would teach the teen-age classes in Jewish history and we would study the Holocaust, and when I was finished I would say to these adolescents, "Why was Hitler wrong?" And they would say, "What do you mean, why was he wrong? Do you mean it was permitted? You can't take people and kill them because you don't like their religion." And I would say, "Was it against the law?" And they would say, "I don't know." And I would say, "No it wasn't; he passed laws that permitted everything he did; so why was it wrong?" They said, "Because you can't do that." And I said, "Are you telling me that right and wrong are not matters of personal decision but they are sort of fixed in the universe?" And these idealistic adolescents would kind of look up at me and say, "Well, yeah, I guess that's what I'm saying. I never thought of it that way."

Again, the good news is, all of these moral laws built into the fabric of the universe are not a limitation, a restriction. They are a liberation. This is what causes us humans to be taken seriously, because we can do things that no other living creature can do. We can respond to a situation in terms of right and wrong; our deeds matter. A lot of people don't understand this. I'm a traditional Jew. Many people assume I go around all day saying, "Oi Vey, would I love to eat pork chops but that mean old God won't let me." Not so! Fact of the matter is, I go around all day saying, "Isn't it incredible, four and one-half billion people in the world and God cares what I had for lunch." God cares how I earn and spend my money and God cares who I sleep with and God cares how I use language and God cares whether I tell the truth or not. You see how all of a sudden this sense of right and wrong redeems my life from insignificance and gives it value. You know what it's like? Can you remember when you were in high school and you stayed up all night working on a paper because you wanted it to be really good and you handed it in on Wednesday and you got it back on Friday with a little check mark on the upper left hand corner and nothing else on the paper. It was clear that the teacher never read it; he or she just gave you credit for handing it in? Remember how you felt? You felt cheated. What's the point of knocking myself out to do it right if nobody cares? This is what we are saying when we say in the name of religion that God cares about all the little moral decisions we make day in and day out.



Many years ago I saw a program on television, it must have been on the "Twilight Zone," about a man who dies and wakes up a moment later at the end of a long line. At the front of the line are two doors; one is marked heaven and one is marked hell. And there is an usher and the usher says, "Move along, keep the line moving, go through either door, choose one and go right through." The man says to the usher, "Wait a minute, where's the Last Judgment? Where am I told if I did more good deeds or more bad deeds?" The usher says, "You know, I don't know where that story ever got started. We don't do that here; we've never done that here; we don't have the staff to do that here. Look, a thousand people arrive here every 10 minutes. Are we supposed to sit down with everyone and go over his whole life story? We'd never get anything done. Now, keep it moving; you're holding up the line; choose either door, heaven or hell; go on through." And the man says, "Wait a minute, where am I judged? Where am I told if I was a good person or not?" The usher says, "I'm trying to tell you, no place; now please move along." And the man walks through the door marked hell. Do you understand why? Do you understand the point of story? We want to be judged. We want to be judged not because we are so sure that we did so well, not because we're so proud of how we've lived. We want to be judged because we need to know that we are being taken seriously as human beings, that our moral decisions matter at the highest cosmic level. And the only way you



***Rabbi Harold S. Kushner challenges the audience with his reflections on God.***

get that sense of significance as a human being is if you believe in a God who not only exists – (believe me, I am tired of talking to college sophomores about whether God exists. That's not the issue. I mean, if God exists the way New Zealand exists, what difference does it make?) – the question is not that God exists, but does God demand righteousness of us and are we responsible to God for how we live? Only if you believe in the God that we who come from a biblical tradition advocate, a God who recognizes our humanity, demands righteousness of us, only then can we feel that our lives take on significance.

And this leads me to the next of the gifts, the next of the items that we're selling when we urge people to accept faith in God, faith in religion as the cornerstone of their lives. It is what I would call a sense of radical forgiveness, and for this I will tell

you a true story. The farther I get from Boston the more detailed I can be in sharing this with you, because there are too many people in Boston who would know who I'm talking about. There was a family in a community near mine that had a very bright, very beautiful 17-year-old daughter. She was a junior in high school and she was getting a little bit bored with her life at age 17. So she fell in with a fast crowd and started to fool around with drugs, managed to graduate from high school because it's really not that hard, went off to college and could not handle the freedom and independence of her freshman year in college. She started to use drugs and to deal drugs more heavily, dropped out of school, drifted into a life of promiscuity. The only time her parents heard from her was when she wrote asking for money. When they stopped sending money, they didn't hear from her at all. They didn't know where she was living; they didn't know if she was alive. One day about a year and a half later, this young woman woke

up in the apartment of a man she didn't even like and she said to herself, "I don't have to live like this." She left the apartment, found a pay phone, called her parents collect and said, "If I come home, will you let me in?" Well of course they did. They welcomed their prodigal daughter back from the dead. She said that before she started to live again, she needed to do two things. She wanted to take a long hot bath and wash her hair, and she wanted to go to synagogue. She bathed, washed her hair, and on Saturday morning they went to

the service. It was a disaster! There was a large opulent Bar Mitzvah celebration going on; all the relatives were there with fur coats and purses, looking at their watches through the whole service. The sermon was about the need to be vigilant against the resurgence of anti-Semitism. The name of God was not mentioned once in the entire sermon. The family came home disappointed. They were looking for something and they couldn't find it. Her parents said, "It's OK, we'll send you to a psychiatrist." The girl said, "No, you don't understand. That's not what I need. A psychiatrist's forgiveness comes too cheaply. I don't want somebody to tell me I'm fine because I'm paying him to say that. I don't want to be told forget it, it's in the past; think of the future. I don't want to be told there was a lot of craziness going on in the late '70s and you just got caught up in

it. I need to be told that what I've been doing for the last two years was sinful, wicked, sordid and defiling, and I need to be told by somebody who recognizes how bad I was, that I am still acceptable, and I don't know where I can get that except to hear it from God. I can't take it seriously when you (my parents) say it to me. I can't take it seriously when a therapist says it to me. I need to hear from God that He knows exactly how far I fell, how bad I was, and that He still loves me." That sense of acceptability, that sense of no longer having to pretend that we're fine, that we're perfect, letting ourselves stand naked before God and knowing He can still accept us, we need that.

Those of you of a traditional Jewish background, you will remember that on the eve of Yom Kippur, before the Kol Nidre prayer, there's one line we recite before the cantor begins to chant Kol Nidre. It goes something like this. "By consent of the authorities above and the authorities below we permit sinners to join the congregation for this service." Kol Nidre is the only service all year where everybody comes at the beginning and stays for the entire service, and they don't understand why and I don't understand why, but I think we need to hear that. I think we need to be told that no matter how bad we've been in the past year, we're still acceptable in the sight of God.

Some years ago I was invited to give a speech at Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore. I was asked to speak to the professional staff, the doctors, the nurses and the hospital workers, at noon and deliver a public lecture at night. When I finished my talk to the staff, the chief of chaplaincy services at Johns Hopkins Medical Center came over to me and said, "Rabbi Kushner, we have a patient here who would love to meet you. He heard you were coming. He's read your book, as it was very important to him. He asked me if I would ask you to come say hello to him for five minutes. I want to make it very clear to you, if you don't want to, you are under no obligation to do this. I'll tell him you're tired and had a busy schedule. He'll understand. He is a 32-year-old Episcopal priest who is dying of AIDS." I thought about that for awhile, and I said, "Yeah, I'll go see him." I followed the chief of chaplaincy down the hall toward this man's room, feeling terribly noble and virtuous. You know, I am the Jewish Mother Teresa. Coming into this room, seeing this frail, emaciated figure in the bed hooked up to tubes, I say to him, "How are you doing?" He said, "Not too good, but I'm getting used to it." And we chatted for awhile. He said some nice things about what my book has meant to him. Then I said to him, because I know this is an issue for a lot of religious people who have AIDS, "Do you have the sense that you are dying without God? That this is in some way a punishment from God?" And he looked at me and said, "No, just the opposite. The only good thing about this is that I've learned in this hospital that what I always hoped was true, really is true. That no matter how much you mess up your life, God is still capable of accepting and loving you." He said to me, "All my life, I tried to be perfect so people would love me. I thought if you're perfect, what's not to love? They have to love you if you're perfect. I probably went into the priesthood as a way of structuring my life so I would be

perfect. Every time I did something that I knew was wrong, and every time I told a lie to cover up for myself, I was sure that God was as contemptuous of me as I was of myself. But now in this hospital, terminally ill, I have learned that whatever I thought of myself, God could still love me. God was capable of knowing who I was and accepting me anyway." He said, "I'm leaving the hospital next week, not because I'm getting better but because there's nothing more they can do for me. I don't know if my congregation will take me back having learned that I'm homosexual, that I have AIDS. I hope they will because there is one more sermon that I need to preach to them. I need to tell them what I have learned here, that no matter how much they've messed up their lives, God is still capable of loving them for who they are."

But what about most of us who haven't felt defiled, who haven't done anything so terrible we need radical forgiveness? What does God offer us along those lines? He offers us what I would call spiritual replenishment. What is the difference between me and the atheist? The difference is not that I do good things and the atheist does bad things. You would be the first to tell me you all know atheists who are the most honest, generous, reliable, sensitive people you've ever met; so that's not the difference. The difference, I think, is this: When the atheist and I have both spent ourselves working for things we believe in, for world peace, for understanding between the races, for helping the poor and homeless, when we have spent ourselves trying to hold the hands of the grieving and the afflicted, the sick and the dying, when we have no more strength and no more love to give, if the atheist can only look inside himself for more love and more strength and there's none there, he's used it up, what does he do then? He burns out, he can't go on. But if I believe in a God who is not simply a construct of my imagination but who really exists, a God outside myself who renews my strength when I've used it up so that I can run and not grow weary, so I can walk and not feel faint, then I don't have to be afraid of expending my last drop of love, because I know that there is more where that comes from.

Ultimately, for me the proof for the existence of God is not the cosmological argument or the ontological argument of the first cause, all that stuff they teach you in Theology 101. For me, the real proof of God is the incredible resiliency of the human soul. I think of the family in my congregation who, 18 years ago, gave birth to a severely brain-damaged child, and every day for 18 years they wake him up and they dress him because he's never learned to dress himself, and they feed him because he still can't feed himself, and they sing songs to him, and they play games with him, and they look for settings where he can be with other young people equally handicapped. I look at these people and say, "You know, I thought I knew them, average people, not terribly spiritual, not terribly well-educated. Is it conceivable that in 1972 they had an 18 year supply of love and strength and courage and they are still drawing on it?" How can people do this? I think a lot of us could do it for a week, for three weeks, for a month. But for a

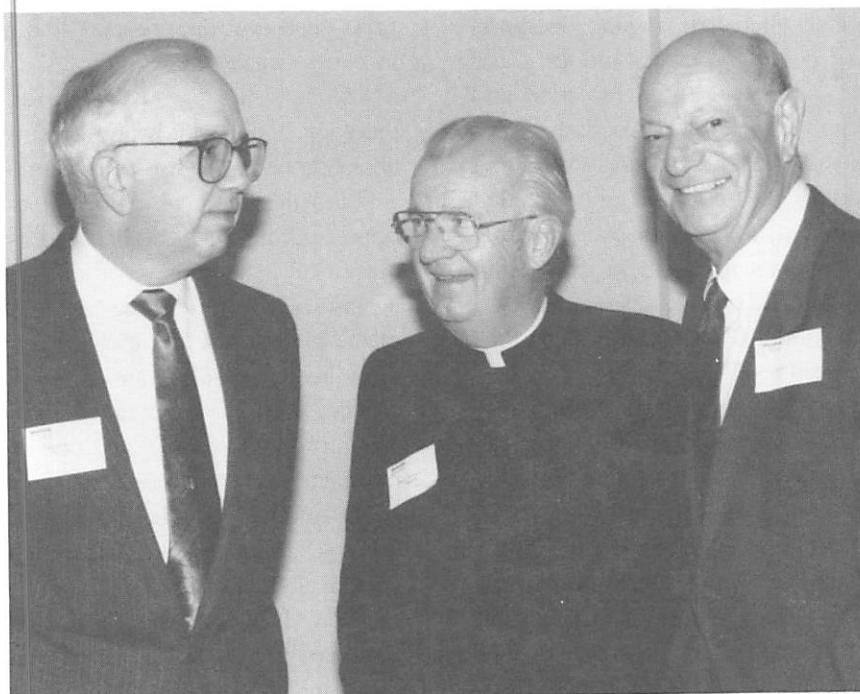
year? For 10 years? For 18 years to do it day after day with no promise of a happy ending to the story? How can anybody go on that long unless it's really true that when you use up your strength and your love, God gives you more. I think if somebody had said to my wife and myself on New Year's Day, 1963, that before this year is out you will have a child who will have the following physical and psychological problems ahead of him, can you handle it?" I'm sure that my wife and I would have said on January 1, 1963, "Please spare us that; we know our limits; we can't take it, it's too much for us." But nobody asked and we found ourselves with a son with a very rare disease, which afflicted him for his entire 14-year life span, and somehow when we needed it, we looked inside ourselves and discovered qualities that were not there the day before but somehow got there when we needed them. Where does this come from? This, for me, is the proof that God is real and that when we turn to Him, He gives us more strength to replenish the strength we've used up. He gives us more love to replenish the love we have given away so that we can run and not grow weary, so that we can walk and not feel faint.

What does the faith commitment do for us? It helps us withstand what I think is the most serious plague afflicting human society today. It's not cancer, it's not heart disease and it's not AIDS, it's loneliness. Loneliness, the absence of meaningful human connections in our lives, that's what makes people stop enjoying life. This is why teenagers and sometimes their parents go to the shopping center when they have nothing to shop for; they just need to be where other people are in the hope that somewhere in that crowd they will find a friendly face. This is why people come home after work and as soon as they walk in the door they turn on the television, not because they want to watch the program – they don't even know what the program is – they need the sound of another human being in their lives. How did we get to this point, where there are more Americans alive today than ever before, where there are whole industries, books, cosmetics, dedicated to helping us deal with loneliness and we are still lonely? Part of it, I'm convinced, is the American emphasis on independence, that if you're really strong, you do things for yourself. I give you my favorite example. I will measure the

validity of this example by watching the audience here very carefully and see how many wives nudge their husbands as I tell the story. Here's the situation: husband and wife going out for a drive in the evening; they're not sure they know how to get to where they're going. The wife says, "Let's pull over and ask for directions." The husband says, "No, let's go a little farther; I think I can find it." Why do we men do this? Why do I do this? Because we have been taught that it is a sign of weakness to ask for help and it's a sign of strength to be able to do something all by yourself. Think of all those John Wayne and Gary Cooper movies we were raised on. Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, "All right, if none of you guys are going to help me, no big deal, I'll handle this all by myself." What he should have done is gone to the next town and checked into a hotel under a false name. But no, to be an American hero is to say, "I can handle this by myself. I don't need any help."

What happens to the family when people are raised to say,

"I don't need anybody. It's nice to have them around but I don't *need* them." What happens to community, what happens to society when we are trained to see everybody around us as a potential rival or a potential customer and it's so hard for us to see them and accept them as friends and open ourselves and be vulnerable to them. And the cure for this endemic loneliness, I think, is found in the synagogue and in the church, in the religious community, one place where you can come and you know that there is no striving and



**Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, left, chats with Monsignor Terrence J. Murphy, center, president of the University of St. Thomas, and Sidney R. Cohen, a sponsor of the lecture.**

no competition, because here we are all equal; where the man in front of you can be an insurance salesman but for this hour he's not going to sell you anything; where the man or woman across the aisle from you can be the owner of a rival business but for these several moments of prayer you are equals; you are bound up in this sense of community. When a religious service works (and I've presided over a lot of services that didn't work and every now and then it just clicks), what happens is all these individual discrete people come from separate directions, come as separate people, and praying together and singing together and standing and sitting and kneeling together, somehow they overcome and transcend their individuality and they become one. And instead of being a separated lonely individual you are one element of a great big

organism singing and dancing in the presence of God, and when you walk out you have been transformed and you don't feel nearly as alone.

My faith in God cures me of the fear of death. It can't cure me of death. Nobody has invented a religion that will teach people to live forever and not die. But as the author of the 23rd Psalm understood, it is not death, it is the shadow of death that robs our lives of joy and confidence. People are not afraid of dying, people are afraid of nullification, of disappearance, that when their time is over they will be like a stone dropped in a pond that for a little while makes ripples and then the water settles smooth again but the stone isn't there anymore. What we really need is a sense that when we have lived we will have made a difference to the world. That is enough to cure us of the fear of death, and that's what I get from my faith. Oscar Wilde once said something marvelous. He said, "The nicest feeling in the world is to do a good deed anonymously and have somebody find out." I believe that and it has become very important to me. I believe that when I do a good deed and nobody thanks me for it and nobody applauds me for it and nobody gives me a plaque, somewhere it is recorded and somehow the world is different for it. And not only the good things I do. What about the bad things I don't do? What about the temptation I managed not to give in to, the angry words I am tempted to speak and withhold, and nobody could possibly know how hard it was for me not to do these things and nobody can appreciate me for it. I have to believe that God understands what I have done and that somehow all of this is known and matters and the world is different for it.

I don't know what happens to us after we die. Well, part of it I know. I know that our bodies are buried and they decay and they return to the earth. I also know that the part of us that is not physical, the part which I'm comfortable calling my soul and some people are more comfortable calling their personality, my values, my memories, my sense of humor, my friendships, my priorities, everything about me that makes me me that is not physical and is the part of me that really defines me – (You know, my physical appearance can change. I can gain weight, I can lose weight, my hair can fall out, I can have a physical accident, I can look different and I'll still be me. When I start acting differently people start saying, "Hey, he's not himself anymore.") – the part of me that is not physical, because it's not physical, cannot die. So my soul, I know, is immortal, but that's all I know. What I don't know is what does it mean for a non-physical soul to exist without a physical body to incarnate it. What do I look like? Do I look like me but transparent? Do I look like Casper the Friendly Ghost? Will I be able to recognize the incorporeal souls of people I knew and loved who are dead if I don't have eyes and optic nerves? Will I be able to feel glad to see them if I don't have glands to control my feelings? It's not only that I don't know the answer, I can't possibly know the answer. Even if somebody told me, I couldn't understand it. It's like trying to explain to a fetus what it's like to be alive. So I don't think about that at all except when a Christian asks me a question about it. What I have

determined is that the world to come does not refer to a different place but to a different time. Isn't that what the phrase, the world to come means? Hell is not a place where they stick you with pitchforks and dip you in oil. Hell is the realization that if I was sarcastic to my daughter when she was a little girl, she will be sarcastic to my grandchildren and it will be my fault. Hell is the realization that if I told a lie two years ago, somebody two years from now will be deceitful and somebody will be deceived because I made the world a less truthful place. Heaven is not harps and sunshine. Heaven is the understanding that if I took a stand for an unpopular position and lost and I thought I wasted my time and energy, it was not wasted. No deed, no good deed, is ever wasted. Somewhere down the line somebody will take a stand and win because of the difference I made. Just as in the world of physics there is a principle of the conservation of matter – nothing disappears, it's transformed into a different shape – in the world of the spirit there is the principle of the conservation of spiritual energy. No good deed ever disappears, it lingers and it changes the world in its own small way.

Some years ago I was reading a book on liberation theology. I don't know how many of you are familiar with liberation theology. It is this radical idea that especially in Latin America the church should ally itself with the poor and the oppressed, not with the rich and established. In this book the author tells the story of a small band of guerrillas fighting against the government in some Central American country. One of the guerrillas is a Catholic priest who has cast his lot with these insurgents. They are surrounded by the army. They are outnumbered, they're outgunned, they're about to be captured and probably executed, and one of the guerrillas turns to the priest and says, "Well, Father, what does your God have to say now?" And the priest has no answer. But as I read that story, it occurred to me I think I know the answer. The answer might go something like this. I think God would say to people in that situation, "I cannot guarantee that you will survive and I cannot guarantee that you will prevail, but I can guarantee that your sacrifice will not be wasted. Somehow the world will be a cleaner and braver place because you were willing to put your life on the line for this. Somewhere down the line even if you lose today, even if you die today, somebody will be moved by your example even if they've never heard of you. The world will be different because of what you've done." For me, this is the immortality I claim and I look for in this life. Beyond that I have no idea what awaits me.

I want to tell you two stories and with that I will conclude. The first story is from the classic Spanish novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by the Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez. García Márquez tells the parable of a town that is afflicted by a very strange ailment, a kind of contagious Alzheimer's disease. People forget, starting with the oldest inhabitants of the town and working its way down to the younger ones. People forget their names, forget the names of the members of their family, forget the names of the most common everyday objects. One young man, still unaffected by



this strange plague, tries to limit it by going around and labeling everything. This is a table, this is a window, this is a cow that has to be milked in the morning. After he has labeled every object in the village, he goes to the town square and puts up two signs. One sign says, "The name of our village is Macondo." The other sign says, "God Exists." That's the story. What is García Márquez trying to say to us in this strange parable? I think what he's trying to say might sound something like this. As we get older, we will forget most of everything we've ever learned. It's already started. You've already forgotten your high school trigonometry haven't you? You've forgotten your college history course, you've forgotten the name of the person who hired you for your first job, you've forgotten the phone number of the first house you lived in after you were married, you've forgotten most of the stuff you once knew and it hasn't done you any harm and you're just fine as long as you don't forget two things. Don't forget the community of which you are a part, because religion is not a series of statements about God. Religion is the community through which we learn what it means to be human. That's why you can have a lot of religions that teach different notions of God and they are all equally valid. Think of it this way. When my neighbor says to me, "My wife is the most wonderful woman in the world," I don't take that as a statement of fact. I take it as a statement of love and loyalty. And so I am not obliged to say to him, "No, I think you're wrong. Mother Teresa is more wonderful and Margaret Thatcher is more wonderful and Meryl Streep is more wonderful." I say to him, "I'm glad your marriage is so happy and your wife means that much to you." When my neighbor says to me, "My church is the only path to salvation," I don't take that as a statement of truth. I take it as a statement of loyalty. I don't get angry at him and say, "Are you trying to tell me your religion is true and mine is wrong? You're crazy! Mine is true and yours is wrong." Instead of saying that I can say to him, "Yes, I'm glad your faith is so important to you because I know how important mine is to me." Because it is a matter of community, we can all believe in families, but we all live in different families. A story is told of Chaim Weizmann, the chemist and Zionist leader who would go on to be the first president of Israel in 1948. Thirty years before that he was lobbying the British government to support the Zionist movement. One member of the House of Lords said to him, "Weizmann, why do you Jews insist on Palestine when there are so many undeveloped countries you could have much more conveniently?" And Weizmann answered, "That's like my asking you why did you drive 15 miles to visit your mother last Sunday when there are so many old ladies living on your street?"

We are loyal to our parents not because we have compared them to others and have decided that they are the best parents in the neighborhood but because they are *our* parents and they gave us life and we owe them something for that. We are loyal to our religious traditions not because we have taken a comparative religion course and objectively decided that the theological claims of our religion are the most valid. We are

loyal to our community because it is the community in which we have grown up and the community that taught us what it means to be a human being in the sight of God. That's the first thing that we cannot let ourselves forget – the community of which we are members.

The second thing we cannot let ourselves forget is that God exists. This brings me to the second and final story. It's a story I found in the writings of Elie Wiesel, the story of the day that man came before God seated on His heavenly throne and said to him, "Which do you think is harder to be, man or God?" God says, "What are you talking about? It's much harder to be God. I mean, what do you have to worry about? Wife, kids, job; there, you've said it. I've got the whole universe, galaxies, planets, meteorites; it all depends on me." And the man said, "I suppose so. But you know you have unlimited power and unlimited time. I have to work with deadlines. If I had all the time in the world, I could run a universe too." God says, "You don't know what you're talking about. It is much harder to be God." Man says, "I don't know how you can say that so confidently. You've never been human! I've never been divine! Tell you what, let's change places for one second, that's all, one second. I be God, you be man, and we'll change back, but we'll have settled this once and for all." God doesn't like the idea but man pleads and whines and begs him and finally just to shut him up, God says, "OK, one second and then we change back." God gets off his throne, man gets on and as Wiesel tells the story, in that one second that man was seated on the divine throne he refused to give God his throne back, and ever since then man has been in charge of the world in place of God.

I find that a frightening story for two reasons. The first reason that probably comes to mind is, as we have seen in the 20th century, man without God to inhibit him is so capable of the most astonishing cruelty. As Ivan Karamazov says in the Fyodor Dostoevsky novel, "If there is no God, everything is permitted." If there is no God, why shouldn't we kill, why shouldn't we steal, and why shouldn't we lie, and why shouldn't the strong take things away from the weak if there is nobody to say that it is wrong, if there is nobody higher than us to keep us from doing what we feel like doing. The second reason, if there were no God, if man were in charge of the world, it's such a big world, how could we run it? If there is nobody to warn us and nobody to guide us, nobody to comfort us, nobody to forgive us, nobody to pick us up and wipe us off when we fall and have soiled ourselves, nobody to replenish our love and our strength when we've used it up, and nobody to assure us that when it's over that it's not really over, how could we live in a world like that? Without a God, man is so alone in a world that is too vast, too cold, and too unmanageable for him. So who needs God? I know I do and I know we do.

Thank you.



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## Questions and Answers

*Editor's note: Rabbi Kushner's presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period. A selection of some of the questions from the audience were posed to him by Rabbi Max A. Shapiro. The questions and answers follow.*

### Rabbi Shapiro

What should we do? We belong to a synagogue where the Rabbi never talks about God, only about the New York Times.

### Rabbi Kushner

When I was growing up we were taught that the New York Times was God. Let me follow that up with a serious answer. Many rabbis are uncomfortable talking about God for two reasons. One is, they are afraid it will be divisive. A lot of synagogues were based on the department store philosophy of maximized traffic. "Get as many people in here as possible; maybe somebody will buy something." Anything that would keep people away, we have played down. So we have really played down ideology and played down theology and we don't want to preach anything that we are afraid people won't feel comfortable with. The other reason is that in our rabbinic education we didn't get a whole lot of theology. I'm a Conservative rabbi. I was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, and the joke around my rabbinical school is you could not translate the name of the school into Hebrew, because there is a Hebrew word for Jewish and a Hebrew word for seminary but there's no Hebrew word for theology. The fraud perpetrated on us in our student days is that Jews didn't do theology. The fact is there is Jewish theology. People want to hear about God.

I have had the occasion, for example, of walking into a house where there has been a death and people would jump on me and say, "Rabbi, why would God let this happen?" And I thought they were asking me a question about God so I would give them a 10-minute summary of what I'd learned in school, and when I finished and their eyes had glazed over, I would say, "Now, I understand that this is a little bit technical. Maybe you didn't get it the first time. Would you like me to repeat it?" And they would say, "Rabbi, please we have suffered enough." People don't want lectures about God. They do want to understand how their religious, spiritual and personal lives are rooted in God. I think what the questioner was saying is, "I don't want my rabbi to sound like he's on the McNeil-Lehrer Report and I don't want him to sound like my therapist. When I want a therapist, I go to a therapist; when I go to Schul, I want a rabbi. I think rabbis have to get over this squeamishness about sounding like rabbis. They have to have the faith that when they speak out in clearly religious terms people will listen and respond. I would like to think that the response to my writings will give them the courage to do that."

### Rabbi Shapiro

Do you recognize Satan as a living force in the world? How

do you explain all the evil that happens?

### Rabbi Kushner

The second part of the question, how do I explain evil, I have written a book about that and the next time you invite me to the Twin Cities, I'll spend an hour talking about it. I was talking, just before the lecture started, with somebody about patterns of questions and I said, "When I speak to predominately Jewish audiences on my theology, one of the first two questions is always about the Yom Kippur prayers. Doesn't this contradict what we say in the synagogue on Yom Kippur that God decides who shall live and who shall die? When I speak to predominately Christian audiences, one of the first three questions is always about Satan: Why don't I just explain evil by saying this is Satan's turn at bat? No, I don't have to posit a Satan; I don't have to posit a malign being as powerful as God yet somehow independent of God. I can explain evil on the basis of natural law, which is not moral so that natural forces treat good people and bad people alike; a falling rock, a speeding bullet have no way of knowing whether it's a good person or a bad person in their path. My beloved seminary teacher, Mordecai Kaplan, used to say, "Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you are an honest man is like expecting the bull not to charge you because you're a vegetarian." Some tragedies happen because nature is blind and some tragedies happen because people are cruel, and I don't have to posit a Satan. There are sources of evil in the world that God made.

### Rabbi Shapiro

You talk about God as a spiritual force. Does God listen to prayer?

### Rabbi Kushner

I would fall back on what Maimonides taught in the *Guide to the Perplexed*, that anytime we use human being language to talk about God we are using it metaphorically. The question – Does God hear prayer? – as I understand it, is not a question about God, God's auditory system, God's ears, God's attention, or anything like that. It's a question about prayer: Are we wasting our time when we pray? If you want to ask me – Does God have ears? – the answer is I don't know, probably not. (To which the response is, "Gee, He must look funny without them.") If you're asking me if we're wasting time when we pray, if that's what you mean by the question, then I definitely feel that we are not, that prayer really matters. Prayer puts us in touch with God and gives us a sense that we are not alone. What you have to understand is, we must be aware of the distinction between God and Santa Claus. That is, praying to God is not showing up in church or synagogue with our shopping list and trying to persuade God that we have been good girls and boys all year and please send us these things. Praying to God is not asking for things, it is getting in touch with the presence of God and being changed by that presence. So from that point of view, if the question is a question about

the usefulness of prayer, I think prayer is not a waste of time, it's very useful. If it's a question about whether God has ears, I have no way of knowing.

### **Rabbi Shapiro**

When you have lost your faith, how do you find it again?

### **Rabbi Kushner**

Essentially, you find faith by looking for it, by realizing you need it. Beyond that, if what the questioner means is how can I believe in a good God living in this rotten world that we live in, this flawed, cruel, unreliable world, I fall back on something that William James once wrote, that if you have two hypotheses – that God exists and the world is good, and that there is no God and the world is chaotic – if you can't prove either one, you are free to accept either one as if it were true and operate on that basis, because you like the results. When I was younger I used to ask, "How could there be a Hitler in the world? How could somebody be that malicious, that cruel, that destructive?" Now that I'm older, I don't worry about that as much. I find myself more likely to ask, "How could there be a Miep Gies in the world?" Do you know who Miep Gies was? She was the woman who hid Anne Frank and her family in the upper attic in Amsterdam. I find myself asking how could somebody have been that brave in the face of Nazi oppression. How could somebody have been so decent to put her own family at risk to save a bunch of casual acquaintances who were Jewish and in danger. I don't know if I'd be brave enough to do it. When I see that, then I suspect I can have faith in the essential decency of the world. For me the question is not is the glass half full or half empty, for me the question is when the glass is empty are the resources in the world capable of refilling it? In my personal and professional experience the answer has been, yes, they are.

### **Rabbi Shapiro**

How do you explain the concept of God to young children?

### **Rabbi Kushner**

The simple answer is, you teach children good concepts about God by role modeling them. There has been a lot of extensive research that says we picture God as having an uncanny resemblance to our parents. If our parents were kind and loving, consistent and forgiving, we assume that God is like that, too. If our parents were short-tempered, arbitrary and punitive, we grow up believing in an angry, punishing God. So the first thing is, be a good parent, be a good authority symbol, stand for good things and your kids will grow up with a healthy notion of God. The second piece of advice I would give is, at a certain age you cannot really teach a mature view of God. My favorite example of this: There is a Jewish legend that on the festival of Shavuot, Pentecost, if you stay up till midnight on this holiday, which is the anniversary of the giving of the Covenant of the Lord at Sinai, the heavens open, you can see God on His throne and any wish you make will be

granted. It happened that a 5-year-old child heard this lesson in temple nursery school, came home two days before the festival and said, "I want to stay up until midnight Saturday night." Parents said, "You're 5 years old; you're not staying up till midnight." Child said, "I want to; I want to see God; I want to see God on his throne." This is where the parents said, "At age 5, we're not going to let you stay up until midnight. When you're 10 years old you can stay up until midnight and see God." And the little kid says, "No, when I'm 10 years old I won't believe it anymore." Young children will believe a lot of things about God that they will ultimately outgrow. All we can do is trust in their maturational process and assume that when they are ready for something they will be able to understand it. They will ask embarrassing questions about death, about causation, about where the world comes from, about all sorts of things. They'll ask questions before they're ready to hear the answers and that will put us in a bind.

I would give two pieces of advice. First, don't plant weeds. That is, don't teach anything that you will three years later try to unteach because all you will do is confuse the child as to whether you are telling the truth, when am I supposed to start taking you seriously. Second, don't be afraid to say to a child, I don't know. Those are magic words – I don't know. It is so much better to say that than to come up with an answer that you hope the kid isn't listening to. More than that, after you've said, "I don't know," go on and say, "You know, when you ask a question like that, I appreciate how grown-up you're getting, because that's a question that grown-ups worry about too. Let's talk about it a little bit now and let's talk about it again three or four years from now when both of us will understand it better. And let's keep talking about it, because this is a question that even grown-ups don't know the final answer to." I think you win the trust and respect of the child when you do that. Essentially if you role model your own authority person in a way you'd like your child to take seriously, if you fill your home with the rituals and observance of your religious traditions, because children will respond to that before they will respond to theological nuances, and if you're not embarrassed to say, "I don't know; let's keep on talking about it over the years," I think you're off to a good start.

### **Rabbi Shapiro**

Is God a creation of humans or not? What did God do before humans existed?

### **Rabbi Kushner**

I'm very flattered that the questioner thinks I know. First question, the answer is no. I do not believe that God is a creation of the human imagination, that man created God in his image. I believe that God is real, and I guess that leads into the second question. When there were no human beings in the world, was there a God? Yes, there certainly was. There was orderliness, there was beauty, there was precision in the world, but there was a dimension of God that had not been realized on earth. Only when human beings emerged could the

potential goodness of God be incarnated here on earth. When there were no people, God existed on earth only in potential, that is, the goodness, the greatness, the holiness of God. Once there were human beings, we didn't create God, we made Him real on earth. To use a very Christian phrase, we incarnated the presence of God in our own lives, in our own efforts to sanctify time and space. God is certainly real and pre-existent to human existence. That's what God did before there was homo sapiens. What did God do before there was a world? I don't know!

### **Rabbi Shapiro**

How do you react to those who call themselves reverent agnostics?

### **Rabbi Kushner**

This reminds me of the last time I was in the Twin Cities, almost exactly a year ago. I came to town innocently touring my book and I found myself on a rather bizarre television show. I don't know if any of you saw it. I was thrown to the lions in the company of this group that had been to Medjugorje in Yugoslavia, where there had been an appearance of the Virgin Mary. Here you have all these people saying, "Yes, yes, it's true; it's wonderful; it changed my life." And I'm up there with some liberal Protestant minister saying, "Well, maybe it's not exactly true." Somebody got up and said he was a reverent agnostic, and one of the clergymen on the show said to him, "Well, you know, if you're right you're right, but if you're wrong you're going to spend eternity wishing you were right." I said to this clergyman, "Now, wait a minute; the gentleman did not say he was a wife beater; the gentleman did not say he was a child molester; the gentleman didn't even say he was a president of an S & L; he said he was an agnostic. Does God send people to hell for flunking theology?" The clergyman said, "God doesn't send people to hell; people send themselves to hell. If he doesn't believe in heaven, how is he going to get to heaven?" And I said, "Wait a minute. You mean if I don't believe in winter, I can go out in the Twin Cities without a coat and not get cold?" At that point, the master of ceremonies changed the subject. When I meet someone who is a reverent agnostic, self-described, I choose to respond to the adjective and not the noun. I choose to accredit his reverence and not his self-proclaimed agnosticism. My friend and colleague, Harold Schulweis, of Encino, California, who I think is the finest rabbi in America, has written of what he calls predicate theology. This is a little bit complicated, but if you remember those accursed high school English classes you recall what a predicate is. It's what comes after an "is" verb in a sentence. Rabbi Schulweis says if you have statements like "God is truth, God is love, God is courage," those are not statements about God. Read them backward, the way we read Hebrew from right to left. They are statements about what kind of attributes are divine. Truth is godly he would read it, courage is godly, love is godly. The man who says I don't believe in God but I believe in honesty and I believe in reverence and I believe in helpfulness and I believe in courage and I believe in love, I

have to wonder whether he is really an atheist because he believes in the same things I believe in. He will say to me, "Come on, Rabbi Kushner, I have a right to decide whether I'm an agnostic or not." I have to respect that, but I would also have to say to him that, except for some fine points of theology, the only difference between us is the difference I alluded to in my speech, that is, if you believe in love and courage and one fine day you just feel absolutely burned out because you have expended so much love and so much courage, where do you think you're going to get more? And at that point we're going to find out if he's really an agnostic or not.

### **Rabbi Shapiro**

What do you think will be our nation's attitude toward reverence, belief in God and humanity?

### **Rabbi Kushner**

Gee, that's a great final question. My guess is 10 years ago nobody could have predicted the physical fitness craze, that all the hotels would have health clubs, people would not only be jogging but getting on treadmills and all these things, watching their cholesterol counts. There was no evidence of it but there was a need for it, because 10 years ago people were flabby, and if you were real smart, you could say people cannot go on indefinitely being flabby. In 1990, people are spiritually flabby, and we just can't go on like that. I think we will soon wake up to the need for a spiritual reawakening. One of the things I think is happening is that we are now dealing with the first generation in the history of the United States that cannot look forward to being more successful than their parents. For the 225-year history of this republic, it has always been an assumption that our children will live in a nicer home, get more education and do better in their careers than we their parents did. For the first time in American history that no longer holds. The parents are so successful, so well-educated, so settled. The opportunities are diminished and closing so rapidly children can no longer count on that. That will create a very severe spiritual crisis. I think the generation growing up now will face two choices. One is to think of themselves as failures, because as Jacob said to Pharaoh in the book of Genesis, "Few and bitter were my days; they haven't matched my parents." The other alternative is to redefine success in other than material terms, and I am betting that's what Americans will do, that a generation will grow up and say, "I don't have as nice a car as my father had, I don't live in as nice a home as my parents did, but I understand better than they ever did that material success is not where it's at." I think we will rediscover the spiritual definition, that the purpose of life is not to get ahead of everybody, the purpose of life is to be a *mensch*. When we discover that, I think the superannuated yuppies, the people who are drifting away from Wall Street and all that, will suddenly discover the need for God, for religious community, for church and synagogue, and I think we are looking forward to a very exciting time as we approach the millennium. ■



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*On Sept. 1, 1990, the College of St. Thomas became the University of St. Thomas.*



# How Jews Pray

RABBI BARRY CYTRON

## 1991 Lecture Series

UNIVERSITY OF  
St. Thomas



CENTER FOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN LEARNING

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# How Jews Pray



**Rabbi Barry Cytron**

Rabbi Barry Cytron, Ph.D., is senior rabbi at Adath Jeshurun Congregation, a Conservative congregation in South Minneapolis. He received his doctorate in Jewish-Christian studies from Iowa State University and has taught Jewish studies as an adjunct faculty member in the Theology Department at the University of St. Thomas. A prolific writer, his articles have appeared in both scholarly and popular journals. He is a regular contributor to the commentary and book review pages of the Minneapolis Star Tribune. He is co-author, with Earl Schwartz, of *When Life is in the Balance* (1986) and author of a children's book, *Fire! The Library is Burning* (1988), which was cited by Learning Magazine as one of the best children's books of 1988.

At the High Holy Days, the most sacred days within the Jewish faith, many congregations rely on a bevy of lay persons, or sometimes professional ushers, in order to manage the throngs of people who come for services. In fact, I can still remember that my home congregation in St. Louis always used blue-uniformed sentries to police the doors during the holidays.

Those men resembled policemen not only in how they looked but also in how they acted, too. Heaven forbid if any of us kids tried to slip into services without a ticket!

Perhaps it was a congregation such as mine, from long ago, that gave rise to the story I once heard – the story of the young girl, who must have been around 6 or 7, who had been at youth services all *Yom Kippur* morning, our Day of Atonement, which is the holiest day of the year. She suddenly became terribly lonesome to see her parents, whom she had seen vanish into the main sanctuary earlier that day.

Deciding that she just *had* to see them, she went up to the sexton of the congregation, who was protecting the door against anyone who didn't have the correct ticket. "I need to get in," said the little girl. "I have to see my parents." "Sorry, but I can't let you. You don't have a ticket." "Oh, please," moaned the child. "Just for a minute. I promise to come right out." "Nothing doing," said the sexton. "I know this trick. You just want to get in and enjoy the services. Kids aren't allowed in. It's the board policy!"

For a few minutes the little girl pleaded her case. Just as strongly, the sexton remained unmoved. Finally, the little girl began to sob. "I must see my mommy and daddy; I really must," she blurted out through her tears. "Please, please let me in." "Enough already, OK, enough," said the sexton. "I'll let you in this one time – but I better not find you praying!"

Sometimes I think there have been too many such people guarding the doors of our congregations; otherwise, how do you explain that we Jews are so noted for not being the best of worship attenders.

Every survey conducted by the Gallup Poll reports the same results: about 40 percent of Catholics say they attend services regularly, some 35 percent of the Protestants do – but as for Jews, only 11 or 12 percent acknowledge getting to

synagogue once a month.

From that story, you might conclude that the answer to this essay's topic is a simple one: "How do Jews pray? They don't!"

But to conclude from those statistics that we Jews don't pray would be to do an injustice. For praying in a synagogue is only one of the ways in which Jews pray. We pray at home. And in the Rockies, as we scan the magnificent vistas. Or in the Boundary Waters, or on the north shore of Lake Superior, or even when walking for a late evening stroll around Lake of the Isles as the sun turns in for the night. Or we pray in the delivery room after a child has been born. Or over a funeral casket at a gravesite.

And if you are like me, you also pray every time you get in your car and get on to the expressway in this town, as I did when merging through the intersections of Interstate highways 94 and 35.

For praying is not only about what we do as a collective body of people inside a sanctuary, though it is surely very much about that. It is also, maybe more, what we do at so many points in our lives when we ask or praise and thank our God.

Yet, I begin with these statistics about synagogue attendance because those numbers point to one of the central issues that I want to explore in this essay's topic.

What is the relationship between public worship and private prayer? What sorts of connections are there between the set liturgy, the formulas and the dress, the prayer book and the routine of the sanctuary – and the very intimate act of expressing one's innermost yearnings, of asking for a need to be met, or thanking God for some gift of grace, or of praising the Source of Being for our lives and our blessings?

This evening, in this unique setting in which we Christians and Jews together explore our traditions, this question of the relationship between public worship and private prayer is a theme that engages both of our traditions. Each of our faiths teach us to pray, even providing us with the words, the melodies, and the times when we are to do so – while yet our inner hearts propel us to expressions that are spontaneous, maybe even inarticulate and very different from that public worship which carries the sanctions of our respective traditions.

To explore this question from its Jewish perspective, we need to look at both the method of prayer – the “how” of prayer as well as the occasion and content of prayer – the “what” of prayer. Let’s begin, first, with the “what” of prayer – the varieties of occasions that give rise to prayer and which, in turn, influence and shape the language, setting and form of what Judaism calls “the service of the heart.”

The Bible points to two overarching themes in prayer. In the book of Psalms, we read: “Give thanks to God, whose mercy endures forever.” Continually throughout the Bible and rabbinic literature, and just as emphatically in the medieval world of mysticism and piety, the creators of liturgy strove to develop language that would capture the mood of *gratitude* for life and *praise* to God for having created a world in which we have so much for which to be grateful.

The most familiar form of “thankfulness prayer” is one we call the *b'racha* – the blessing or benediction. It is a simple formula, regularly consisting of an opening stem of six words that goes like this in Hebrew: *Baruch ata Adonai. Eloheinu Melech ha-olam*, which we might translate like this: “Praised are You, Adonai, our God of the Universe.”

Depending on the occasion that gives rise to the gratitude and praise – whether it be a hearty piece of bread or a fragrant bouquet of wine – we then add several words in Hebrew to take note of what it is within our universe that we are experiencing. Our completed blessing thereby acknowledges the gift we have received.

The most common blessings are for those everyday objects that nourish us. But there is a whole set of prayer blessings that are not so well-known, but which are strikingly significant for the lesson they teach us about the importance of stopping to reflect on the variety, scope and bounty of creation. There are blessings when seeing the first blossom in the spring, or when hearing thunder or seeing lightning or a sunrise or a rainbow. There is a special blessing when meeting a person of great religious learning, another when encountering someone of extraordinary secular achievement.

There is even a special blessing to be recited when seeing a monarch. It was this blessing – “Praised are You, God, who has shared your glory with flesh and blood” – which the noted Israeli novelist Shai Agnon recited when he received the Nobel

Prize for literature from the King of Sweden.

This list of blessings of gratitude is quite extensive. A blessing for the wonder of our bodies, another to acknowledge that it functions so often so well, another when we reach a milestone in our lives, and yet another when our children reach milestones in their lives – and are ready to head out on their own.

In fact, our propensity for reciting blessings made its way into Broadway, you might recall, when, in “Fiddler on the Roof,” the rabbi proclaims that there is a blessing for everything and everyone, and one of his disciples says, “Even for the czar?” To which the rabbi proclaims, “Absolutely!” And then the rabbi proceeds to offer *his* special prayer for the czar: “May God keep him – far away from us!”

Now this last prayer, Broadway style, points to the second broad category of Jewish prayer. For alongside the vast array of blessings and words of praise, there is another type of prayer, words of petition and request for health and healing, or for strength and serenity. As in other traditions, so in Judaism, there are many petitionary prayers – of the most poignant sensibilities. These include ones in which we ask not to be abandoned as we grow older, or in which we ask for protection as we set out on a perilous voyage or prepare for a serious medical procedure, or in which we pray that goodness and divine providence guide our steps.

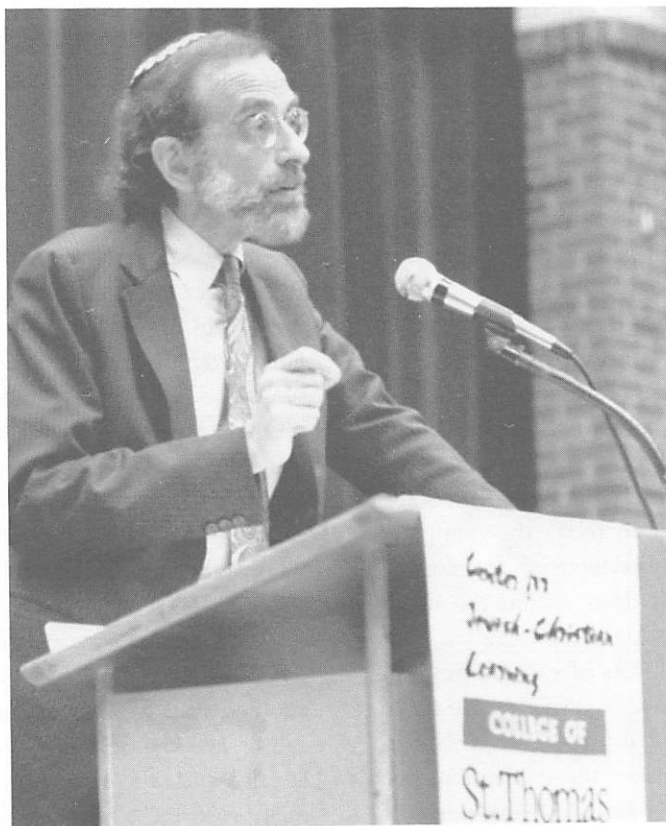
In many ways, it is this form of prayer, the “asking” or “seeking” variety, which seems so very difficult to our modern sensibilities. Many theologians

and rabbis and priests have struggled to help their congregants and themselves understand what it means to offer prayers of “petition,” to help them appreciate what it means when our faiths speak of prayers as being “heard” or “answered.”

The responses to those powerful questions vary, from the traditional language that someone of the Christian Science faith might offer, to the decidedly more modern approach to prayer, which someone like Rabbi Kushner might offer.

We pray for many reasons, then, and understand prayer in many ways. I imagine that is the meaning of that wonderful story of the confirmed non-believer who used to come to services at the synagogue every morning.

Every day, bright and early, Levinson was there. Yet whenever the subject of “belief” came up, he was always quick



**Rabbi Barry Cytron talks about blessings as part of Jewish prayer.**

to point out that he was certainly an agnostic, and maybe even an atheist, and that he probably always would be. "But if that's true," said his buddy, "then why do you continue to come to synagogue?" "Listen," he would explain in self-defense, "people go to synagogue for all kinds of reasons. Take my friend Goldfarb, for example. He comes here to talk to God. I come here to talk to Goldfarb."

Whether this story is true – as well it may be, since I know a lot of congregants who talk to the Goldfarbs of our congregation every Saturday morning – or whether the story is only apocryphal, it points out important things about public Jewish prayer, and perhaps about Christian church prayer, too.

People participate in public worship for all sorts of reasons. Some of the reasons have to do with the rite and the pageantry, the music or the art, the language or the officiants; moreover, perhaps most importantly, people come to public places of worship to be part of a community, to escape their aloneness, to find relationship.

Indeed, within Judaism, prayer as part of "community" is highly extolled. In traditional congregations, a quorum of 10 must be present in order that the full liturgy be recited. This quorum, which carries the name *minyan*, is itself considered to constitute the community whenever it assembles.

Individuals are urged to be part of the *minyan* whenever present. While they may certainly pray at home, and are actively urged to do so, it is only inside of that *minyan* that the full service, including the reading of Scripture, takes place.

While less traditional congregations have modified the requirements for the quorum of 10 and do not insist on some precise number of people in order to recite the complete worship service, the notion of public worship remains as strong within the liberal community as it does within the more traditional congregation.

Perhaps the clearest manifestation of this communal orientation is that so many of our prayers – whether we be of liberal congregations or more traditional ones – are recited in the plural form. The requests we voice, the confessions we make, the praises we utter – all of them, with the rarest of exception – are phrased in the plural voice. We are a faith that almost always speaks communally whenever we pray.

And it is this very fact that gives rise to the tension I spoke of at the beginning of my remarks. How do we balance the public nature of our prayer against the needs and yearnings of the individual congregant in attendance as that liturgy is celebrated?

How can people, personally and sincerely, be expected to pray ancient words written centuries ago? What are they to do with terminology that sometimes seems archaic, that sounds foreign conceptually as well as literally? What is the proper relationship between the set formulas and times and rites of the temple or synagogue worship – and the private feelings or inclinations of the individual worshippers?

In many ways, this tension constitutes one of the boldest problems of traditional religion. There is a passage in the *Talmud* that tries to explore this challenge. Says the *Talmud*,

Rabbi Eliezer taught: "Anyone who makes his prayer into a fixed routine (what we call in Hebrew *keva*), such a prayer is not effective.

"And what does that mean?" asks the *Talmud*.

Then a variety of responses are offered. One rabbi suggests that routine prayers are ones that feel like a burden. Another sage says that they are the sort which are not said fervently. A third rabbi offers the opinion that real prayer, to avoid becoming routine, must consistently have something fresh inserted into it. To which a fourth says that whenever he tries to do that, and insert something different or fresh into his praying, he becomes totally confused.

This brief section of the *Talmud* is especially contemporary in its tone. These rabbinic opinions are apparently concerned with what we would call "the psychological state" of the worshiper. Is the person who prays in community approaching that particular moment joyfully – or has the person come to it as a "task," a "chore" to be done with? As the rabbis see it, the way one approaches the acts of prayer makes all the difference in whether it "works," whether its words enter the person reciting them.

In a book just out, titled *Finding our Way*, Jewish educator Barry Holtz explores the ways in which each of us, every time we are in a synagogue, tries to balance the routine of the liturgy with the inner yearnings we need to voice. As he sees it, we do several things to meet this need. Many of us do some mental translating as we recite the words. We might, he suggests, read the classic opening lines of the morning service each day in a different way. Take, for example, the two opening lines of the morning service: "Praised are You, God, who clothes the naked!" "Praised are You, God, who supplies my every need."

On one day, we might read these lines as a personal reflection about ourselves, about our own personal needs. At another time, we might recite these words and see them as a call to action – to open ourselves to those who are naked, literally, and who need our attention. And on a third day, we might read the text about our "daily needs" and see it in the larger context of the entire universe, of the needs of our ecosystem and our responsibilities to the "needs," not only of those who live today but of those who will inhabit this universe in ages to come.

The liturgy, in other words, serves as a focusing device, a tool to help us be in touch with the deepest values of our tradition. In this sense, then, prayer is language spoken as much to the person uttering it as it is to a Power beyond ourselves.

In addition to the inevitable mental editing we do whenever we read the traditional words, we do something else. We allow the words, as it were, to "wash" over us. We permit the words of the prayer book to stimulate other associations, snippets of thoughts connected to the themes of those sacred words we read.

We might, for instance, pray the traditional blessing, which reads, "Praised are You, God, Creator of light," and on one day



connect it to the actual sunlight flowing through the window. But in the winter, when we recite these words of the morning service while it is still dark, we might think of the movement of the planet and our anticipation of the spring warmth. Or we might read the word "light" and interpret it in a symbolic way, as a grand metaphor for truth and its illuminating power on our lives.

The liturgy of our tradition, in other words, is a stimulus and a guide. It calls us to attention. It reminds us of the vast range of concerns in our faith, of its moral and spiritual claims on our lives. It sensitizes us to our world, and our place within it.

For many of us, the liturgy gives expression to words that those of us who are not poets could never express as beautifully. At other times, it gives voice to values that we might have permitted to fall by the side, to teachings which we must dust off from the bookshelves of our faith and place once more inside our lives.

The great theologian of our generation, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, often spoke of prayer as a "flashlight" – as a beacon of light thrown into the darkness, by which we are

shown how to walk, whose rays help us grope toward a better world.

It is, I believe, the perfect metaphor for prayer. For in a world that often seems so dark, prayer can illuminate – pointing us to our best values and our greatest dreams; moreover, by urging us to pray in community, it continually teaches us that our ultimate hope for a better world must emerge when we reach out to one another.

Elie Wiesel once told the story of a man lost in a forest who had wandered for many days; with increasing dismay he believed that he would never find his way out. Then he looked up to see a person approaching him. Grateful beyond expression that he thought he had met his rescuer, he ran up to the man to ask directions out of the forest.

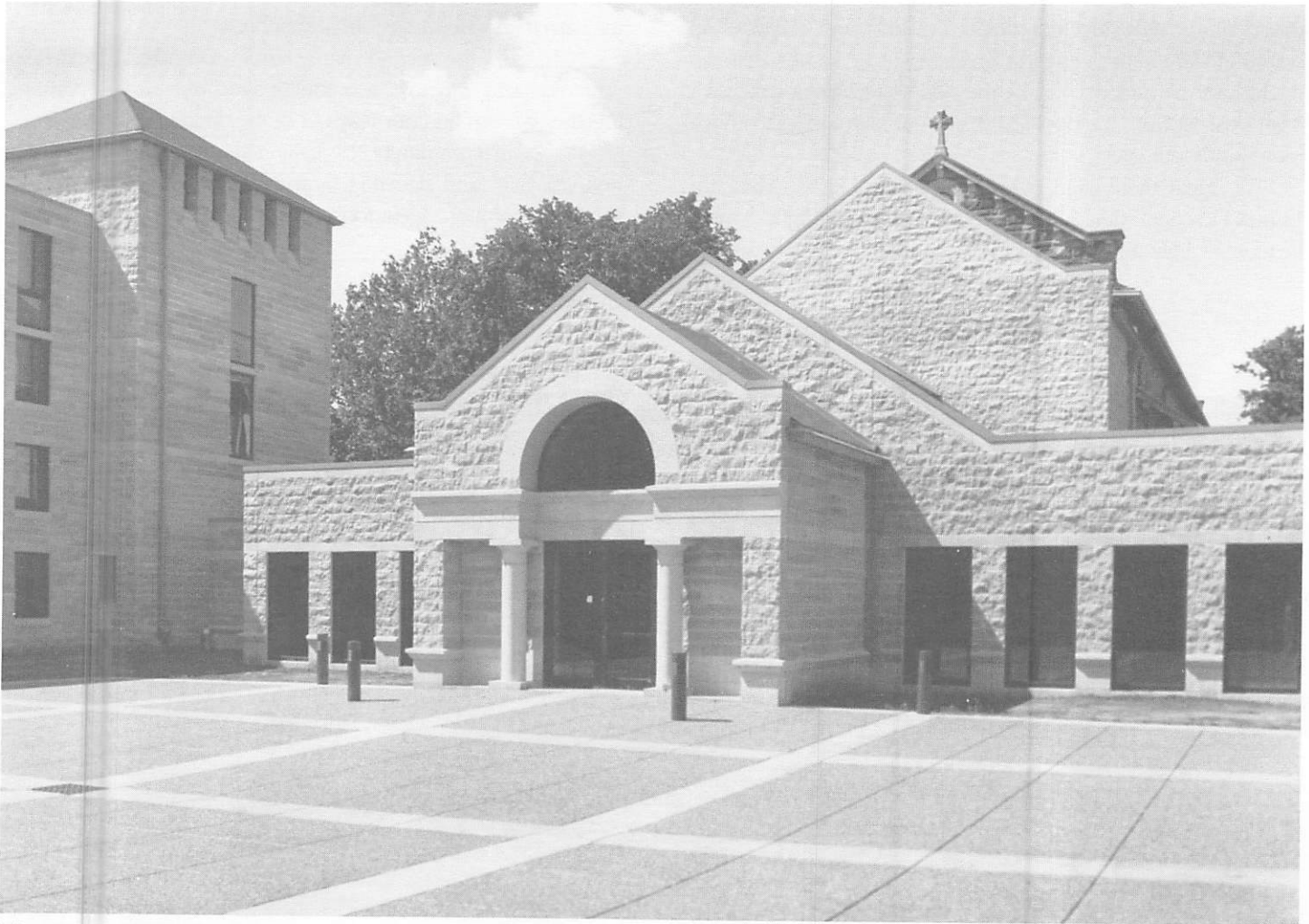
"Oh," said the second man. "I'm so sorry that I can't help you. You see, I'm lost, too. But if we hold hands, perhaps together we can find our way out of the darkness."

Prayer in community, by calling us to the values of our people's faith and directing us to our covenant with God, is surely one of those great tools that can lead us out of darkness into light. ■



*Father Robert M. Schwartz, center, and Rabbi Barry Cytron, right, share a lighter moment with Rabbi Max A. Shapiro.*





*The Center for Jewish-Christian Learning is housed at the School of Divinity of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn.*

# Catholic Prayer – A Distinctive Flower on Jewish Roots

REV. ROBERT M. SCHWARTZ

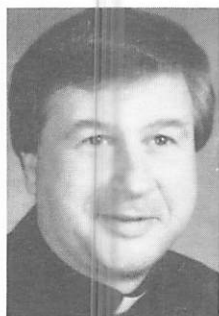
## 1991 Lecture Series

UNIVERSITY OF  
St. Thomas



CENTER FOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN LEARNING

# Catholic Prayer – A Distinctive Flower on Jewish Roots



Rev. Robert M. Schwartz

The Rev. Robert M. Schwartz, S.T.D., is spiritual director and dean of formation at The Saint Paul Seminary at the School of Divinity of the University of St. Thomas. He earned his doctorate in theology with an emphasis in spirituality from the Gregorian University in Rome, Italy. In addition to conducting retreats for priests and functioning as an associate pastor, he has been published regularly in *Modern Ministries Magazine*. His most recent book, *Servant Leaders of the People of God: An Ecclesial Spirituality for American Priests*, was hailed by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, archbishop of Chicago, as a “masterful summary of conciliar and episcopal teaching on the priesthood.”

Children are naturally curious. They explore their environment and ask endless questions. Parents anxiously await the day on which a child will be mature enough to ask the most obvious and difficult question of them all: “Where did I come from?” At first, the facts of life seem to be the most striking and difficult aspect of the child’s question. Yet, as the child grows into adulthood, “Where did I come from?” becomes a question about God and a question about the human tradition that made us who we are today. To inquire about the way Catholics pray demands that we ask this most basic of all questions. While Catholic prayer is unique and distinctive, it is obviously a flower growing out of Jewish roots. This is clear in the comments that lie ahead.

Catholic Christian prayer traces its origin to Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Jew, lived as a Jew and prayed as a Jew. Even though the Catholic approach to prayer was deeply influenced by the Gentile world into which it passed, its roots lie firmly within the Hebrew Scriptures. Words of Hebrew-Aramaic origin such as amen, alleluia, hosanna and abba mark both the Christian Scriptures and the landscape of Catholic prayer identifying them forever with their Jewish roots.

When Jesus is asked which is the greatest of the commandments, he replies with the daily prayer of the pious Jew: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:29-30). When experiencing the destitution of the cross, Jesus cries out in the words of Psalm 22 – “Eloi, Eloi, lama Sabachthani – My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” His last words are those he had memorized in his youth, words from the great Jewish book of prayer, the Psalms.

Even today, the Psalms form the backbone of Catholic prayer. Monks and nuns gather seven times a day to pray the Psalms, completing all 150 every week, as they have for centuries. The official morning and evening prayers recited by countless Catholic men and women around the world contain two Psalms upon rising and another two at sunset. If it is true that the world is sustained by the recitation of the Psalms, as a well-known rabbinic saying proclaims, then countless Catholic

men and women join in this great work – for as the sun moves from continent to continent, never is there a moment when the whisper of the Psalms disappears from the Catholic community.

On the night before Easter, the holiest and most powerful moment of prayer in the Catholic Church, a long vigil occurs in which 12 readings are proclaimed to the congregation. These include the creation of the world, the sacrifice of Isaac, the institution of the Passover, the Exodus from Egypt, and the rescuing of Israel from the Babylonian exile. The clear premise of the Catholic Church is that without a foundation in these pivotal events in Jewish religious consciousness, it is impossible to understand who Jesus is, what the Catholic Church is about, and the way in which Catholics pray.

You have probably noticed that Christian Holy Week and Easter happen at approximately the same time as the Jewish Passover each year. This is because Jesus died during Passover week and the first Eucharist took place within the context of a seder meal the night before his death. Ever since that night, Catholics have continued to use the passage of Israel from bondage in Egypt to freedom in the promised land as our primary image in understanding the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Mass, which celebrates the passage of Jesus from death to life, continues to be seen against the background of a Passover meal, for even today the Western Church uses unleavened bread in every Mass – a reminder of the seder supper from which it came.

The Mass is the most important Catholic prayer. Today it is often referred to as the Eucharist – a word derived from the Greek for *thanksgiving*. Thankfulness to God for His mighty saving works is a primary characteristic of Jewish prayer. This thankfulness is expressed in an endless litany of blessings throughout the Jewish cycle of prayer. Knowing where Catholics came from, it should not be surprising that the most sacred moment in Catholic prayer begins with the words, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.” The whole assembly responds: “*It is right to give God thanks and praise.*” The priest then proceeds with the great prayer of thanksgiving, praising God for his saving works. It is in remembering what God has done, and in praising God for what he has already accomplished for us, that we believe that God acts here and

now to save us. In this we are following the insight of ancient Israel and the Passover ritual, which Jews use even today. This ritual instructs us very carefully: *"In every generation, each person should feel as though he himself had gone forth from Egypt, as it is written: 'And you shall explain to your children that day, it is because of what the Lord did for me when I, myself, went forth from Egypt' "*" (Exodus 13:8). As Catholics, we believe that in receiving what appears to be bread and wine in the Mass we are truly nourished on the body and blood of the risen Jesus, and participate in his passage from death to life. We believe this, not because of some magic words or ritual, but in response to the Hebrew Scriptures, which portray God as present when his saving deeds are recalled with faith.

Modern Christians have become so accustomed to seeing the figure of Jesus nailed to a cross as a symbol of a loving God that they are almost incapable of sensing the horrified reaction of others to the suggestion that God would show love through a man nailed to a tree. Jewish reaction to the cross can be even more intense, for Jews have been blamed for this event and persecuted in the name of the one crucified for centuries. For most Jews the cross has not been a symbol of love but one of hatred, degradation and rejection. To talk about the meaning of the cross in Christian prayer we may well have to bridge deeply felt and completely understandable emotions; it is necessary that we do so, since the cross is so central to the way Catholics pray.

I am not so sure that in talking about the cross I am not addressing Christian piety as well as Jewish understanding, for Christians often place more emphasis on the cross as appeasement of a displeased God than on the death of Jesus as the mysterious gift of self in love to another. Christians use the language of sacrifice in explaining the death of Jesus. In doing so, we apply to Jesus familiar images from the Hebrew Scriptures, images such as *sin offering*, *peace offering* and *spotless lamb*. The identification of Jesus with the Passover lamb is so strong that when the soldiers break the legs of the two thieves crucified with Jesus, but open Jesus' side with a spear rather than break his legs, the command about the Passover lamb in the book of Exodus is invoked in the Gospel of John: *"You must not break any bone of it"* (John 19:36). The central words of the Mass proclaim that the blood of Jesus is the blood *"of the new and everlasting covenant."* The intention is to place Jesus in the context of the sacrifices offered on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

The Epistle to the Hebrews, a portion of the Christian Scriptures addressed explicitly to Jewish followers of Jesus, clearly makes this connection. *"But when Christ came as high priest of the good things which have come to be, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands. ... For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, how much more will the blood of Christ"* (Hebrews 9:11-14). While Jesus was not from a Jewish priestly family, Christians believe that he is a priest and that his death is a sacrifice in which He is Himself

the Lamb of God.

Since Catholics not only make the sign of the cross at the beginning and end of their prayers – that is, they draw the cross on themselves from forehead to midsection and shoulder to shoulder – but also are blessed in the form of the cross at key moments in life, and believe that every Mass makes the cross present as a new Passover, it is important that we concentrate on the meaning of the cross a bit longer. A helpful image in understanding the significance of the cross in Catholic prayer may be Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac. The test given to Abraham is his willingness to offer his son in sacrifice as a sign of covenant obedience. In staying Abraham's hand and preventing the killing of the young man, the angel affirms Abraham's place as the father of the chosen people: *"Because you have done this, because you have not refused me your son, your only son, I will shower blessings on you, I will make your descendants as many as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore; ... all nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants as a reward for your obedience"* (Genesis 22:16-18).

Catholics see the death of Jesus as the sacrifice of Abraham's son and David's son – indeed a Jewish son by whom all nations of the earth shall bless themselves. Even more, we Catholics see Jesus as the Son of God, God's only beloved son. In the death of Jesus, God shows forth obedience to his own covenant by forging an everlasting bond of covenant love in the free gift of His own Son offered on the cross. The death of Jesus reverses the obedience demanded of Abraham. Now, it is the sacrifice of God's Son that is the sign of covenant faithfulness. Catholics see the cross more as a sign of God's faithfulness to us than of our obedience to God. Yet, Jesus is also son of Abraham, and the cross represents the fusion of divine and human love in the marriage of God and His people.

Prayer within the midst of the assembled church is given great weight by Catholics. Mass attendance on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath, is one of the few prayer experiences to which Catholics are bound by church law. We are often reminded that we pray as a community, not simply as individuals. As members of the assembly we listen to the Word of God, we are strengthened by the mighty works of God, and we are sent forth on mission to the world. The Catholic emphasis on being *the church* testifies to a deep sense of belonging to a redeemed people called forth to a special mission in the world. *Chosen people*, *people of God*, and *assembly* are all concepts derived from the Hebrew Scriptures and operative in the Catholic approach to prayer. Contemporary attempts to make religion a private concern of individuals on a solitary faith journey fly in the face of the communal solidarity that Catholics inherited from the Jewish people. Being a Catholic suggests not only a religious faith but also membership in a global community. This sense of being the *people of God* is one of the strongest ways that Jewish identity has shaped Catholic self-understanding.

Catholics are encouraged to pray at home and alone as

well as in church. Prayer at the beginning and end of the day, as well as before and after meals, are typical examples of this prayer. Many Catholics spend time by themselves pondering the Scriptures or in contemplative prayer and personal devotions. Contemplative prayer – quiet entry into the mystery of God's presence in the human heart – is very important in the Catholic tradition. Many Catholics seek a peaceful place at home, in a chapel or in nature where God can be worshiped and enjoyed in solitude. While these forms of prayer are essential, the major Catholic prayer experiences still happen in an assembly larger than the family. This is a major difference between Jewish and Catholic prayer. Among Jews the seder and other family prayer experiences focus attention on the home. Among Catholics the focus of attention is the larger assembly gathered in the church building. Today many Catholics are attempting to develop significant rituals for family prayer. In doing this we have much to learn about the centrality of the family from our Jewish brothers and sisters.

To this point, I have been avoiding one of the most difficult questions in understanding the roots of Catholic prayer in Judaism. I would like to pose the question from the Jewish perspective: How many gods do Christians worship? Catholics may be shocked by the inquiry. Certainly we worship one God. In this we stand as heirs of the great monotheistic tradition of Israel. Yet our belief in one God who is three persons is baffling to Jews and confusing to many Catholics as well. If we look to the Christian Scriptures, we find that the word *God* usually refers to the God of Israel or the one Jesus calls *Father*. It is this Father who is the source of life, the one to be worshiped, and the ultimate goal of the religious journey. At this point the God of Israel and the God of Jesus are clearly the same – the one difference being the unique way in which Jesus claims to be *son* of Israel's God.

The situation is complicated by the few, but important, passages in which Jesus is presented as having divine characteristics. John's Gospel says it most clearly. When Jesus says, "*The Father and I are one*," his Jewish audience responds angrily with the words: "*You are only a man and you claim to be God*" (John 10:30-33). There is no doubt that Catholics believe that Jesus is divine, and, in fact, the incarnation of God in human flesh; furthermore, the Christian Scriptures refer to the Holy Spirit as God's Spirit and therefore divine as well. Catholics believe, then, that there is but one God, the God of Israel; within the one divine nature there are three persons interacting with one another in the work of redemption: the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. If you are baffled at this point, it may be comforting to realize that both saints and theologians hold that the Trinity is a mystery, a part of the otherness of God that is beyond human understanding. Yet, the Trinity is important for the way in which Catholics live and pray.

Those who pray in accord with the classical forms of the Catholic tradition address their prayer to the Father. They pray not so much *to* Jesus but *through* Jesus as the one who reveals the Father to us and is our mediator with God. They also pray

by the power of the Holy Spirit, who is divine grace present in our hearts. The official Catholic liturgy is very careful about this and almost always addresses prayer to God the Father. Jesus is presented in the liturgy as living word, divine model, mediator and food for the journey to God. The Holy Spirit is presented as the power that makes Christian living possible. While Jesus and the Holy Spirit are essential to Catholic prayer, the major classical prayers in the Catholic liturgy usually do not address them, but only the Father of Jesus – the one identified by Jesus as the God of Israel. Popular Catholic devotion is not nearly so careful in this regard. Since Catholics believe that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons within the one God, most also address personal prayer to them. There is a difference, then, in how individual Catholics pray and how the church prays officially. While insisting that God is Trinity, the official liturgy is much closer to Jewish forms in usually addressing prayer to the Father alone.

Along with belief in one God, insistence that no images of that God be made is among the strongest injunctions of Judaism. The second of the Ten Commandments puts it quite bluntly: "*You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth, you shall not bow down to them, or serve them*" (Exodus 20:4-5). Judaism abhors any suggestion that the all-holy God could be mediated by the material world. Even though historical actions and human words manifest God's saving will for his people, Jews believe that God is totally separate from these things. Catholics, on the contrary, insist that God became incarnate in the humanity of Jesus. They see this belief foreshadowed in Jewish reverence for the Torah as the Word of God. In a leap of faith that moves Catholics far beyond their Jewish starting point, Catholics reverence Jesus as the Word of God made flesh. Belief that God has become incarnate in Jesus has drastically modified religious insight and devotion among Catholics, virtually eclipsing Jewish abhorrence for images of God expressed in the second commandment. As a consequence, not only do Catholics believe that God is identified with the humanity of Jesus but we also believe that statues, pictures and icons can lead us to God. Catholics use images in prayer, not because we believe that God is present in them – that would be idol worship – but because we have learned from Jesus that the human can mediate the divine. Catholic spirituality sees God not only as transcendent and completely separate from the created world but also as immanent and to be experienced in human life and material things. Because Catholics pray to a God who is both transcendent and immanent, our prayer can be mystical and otherworldly one moment, and earthy and enmeshed in humanity the next.

Saints are another way in which Catholics see the presence and activity of God being mediated by the human. In honoring the saints Catholics single out heroic men and women in every age who made the reign of God concrete in their daily lives. In doing so, Catholics seek inspiration for their own vocation as servants of God's reign and prayerful support from those who



have gone before them in the faith. The ability of great figures, past and present, to inspire us is taken very seriously in the attachment of many Catholics to particular saints. Among the saints, Mary, the mother of Jesus, has an altogether unique role. She is seen as the embodiment of the Jewish people in their quest for the Messiah and the one chosen to say "yes" to the promised one when the awaited moment came. To the Catholic faithful she is the perfect daughter of Israel and the first among the disciples of Jesus. She goes on teaching the Catholic community what it means to be open and responsive to the will of God. Although a treasured focus of spirituality for centuries, Mary offers a welcome feminine face to the religious aspirations of many Catholics today.

The saints are not gods, nor do they compete with the one God for our attention. Catholics address the saints as friends in a timeless community of faith. We believe that the saints pray for us, much as our living friends do. This prayer has power with God and unites the church in one community that spans space and time. Catholics also pray for the dead, believing that the charity of the whole community has an important role in bringing all into the presence of God.

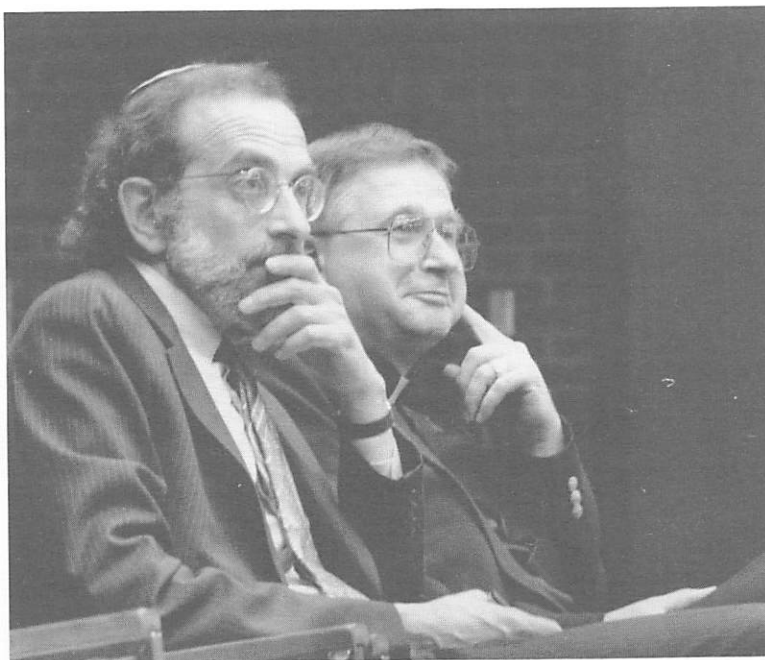
A key factor which may well make Catholic prayer very different from that of their Jewish brothers and sisters is the universal Catholic insistence on life after death. Devotion to the saints and prayer for the dead is an illustration of this belief. While we believe that the reign of God is already present and active in the world, we also look forward to the universal reign of God that is yet to come. Human progress and activity are important, but the kingdom that Catholics seek is not simply a future, more perfect historical moment. In some mysterious way the reign of God lies beyond history and beyond the grave. Our belief in the resurrection of Jesus has had a profound influence on the way we view human history. Not only did Jesus live fully and courageously within the world as we know it, but by his death and resurrection he moved beyond the present order of things. Belief in the resurrection of Jesus focuses Catholic prayer not only on a better world but also on another world – a world that will be no less material than this one, yet one which is totally beyond the reach of human ingenuity, since it demands the intervention of God, the second coming of Jesus, and the resurrection of the dead.

At its worst, belief in another world has lulled people into silence about present pains and sorrows in hope of a better life

after death. Prayer, in this context, could be rightly criticized as the opiate of the people. At its best, belief in another life has empowered the witness of many Catholics to values that are mysterious and hard to explain without reference to another world. The dedication of Mother Teresa and her sisters to the poorest of the poor is based on her belief that what we see is not all that we get – there is much more yet to come. Catholics who lay down their lives as witnesses to religious belief or in solidarity with the oppressed are also strengthened by trust in a future life. Archbishop Romero and the four slain American women in El Salvador, as well as the countless men and women persecuted for defending freedom of conscience and human dignity, are examples of the way that prayerful communion with a future world strengthens active commitment to human betterment in the world today. While numerous examples of similar courage and dedication exist in the Jewish community, Catholics treasure their belief in a future life and

find in it a source of strength in dealing with life today.

One of the most difficult choices to understand, for Jews and Catholics alike, is the decision to remain unmarried or celibate for the sake of God's reign. Men and women who have chosen this form of dedication seek to focus their attention and their energy on prayer and service; in doing so they also raise questions about enduring values and the importance of looking beyond the present, no matter how good earthly things may be. While this way of life is almost without parallel



**Rabbi Barry Cytron and Father Robert M. Schwartz wait to be introduced by Rabbi Max A. Shapiro.**

in Jewish consciousness, it flows from the insistence within the Hebrew Scriptures that the chosen people have a spousal, covenantal relationship with God, and that God alone is to be worshiped and served. This way of life, derived from the prayer experience of some Catholics, calls the whole community back to focused attention on the God of Israel.

Jewish religious belief makes moral demands. This fact is enshrined in the Ten Commandments and strengthened by the insistence of the prophets that love of neighbor and care for the poor is a duty required by God. While God alone is all-holy, the book of Leviticus reminds the Hebrews that: "It is I, the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God; you therefore must be holy because I am holy" (Hebrews 11:45). This holiness is shown forth in a way of life made up of both religious practices and active concerns for the needs of others.

Just as Jewish prayer changes the way in which the believer interacts with daily life, so Christian prayer aims at empowering a moral life focused on justice and charity. Catholics have learned from Jews to put prayer to the test in the crucible of moral responsibility and concern for others. Prayer and sanctity go together for us; Catholic teaching affirms that prayer without a love that does justice is not prayer at all.

The primary way in which Catholics know that their prayer is being answered is in the transformation of their lives. Prayer exists not to change God but so that we might be changed. Whenever the peace, love and justice of God is manifested in our lives, then our prayer has been heard. We do believe in prayers of intercession and see these petitions as an expression of love for others. We also believe that God responds to our prayer, but the primary response God gives lies in our own transformation, making us a part of the solution we seek. Miracles, too, are a part of Catholic consciousness. God does intervene in human life, as the Scriptures testify. Yet God

usually works by transforming the human, not by suspending it. Prayer opens us to the possibility of participating in God's saving love for the world in very ordinary ways.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus provides us with our concluding insights into the way Catholics pray. He reminds us that God is our common Father, and that we are to reverence God and seek the reign of God in all things. As brothers and sisters who acknowledge our weakness in the face of temptation, we are to forgive one another as we seek the forgiveness of God. Armed with enough bread for the day, with the gift of forgiveness, and with zeal for God's reign we have all that we really need.

Yes, Catholic prayer is unique, rich and varied. It has been transformed by the person of Jesus and modified by the Gentile world into which it passed. But no one who has studied it with any depth can fail to be impressed by an overwhelming fact: Catholic prayer is truly a distinctive flower growing out of Jewish roots. ■



*An audience of more than 300 contemplates the meaning of prayer for both Jews and Christians.*

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